

OUSMANE SEMBENE: THE AESTHETICIZATION OF MEMORY AND HISTORY

by

PETER MWAURA GACHANJA

(Under the Direction of RACHEL GABARA)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the aesthetics of memory in five of Sembene's texts: *Le Dernier de l'Empire* (a novel), *Vehi-Ciosane* (a novella) and three films (*Ceddo*, *Emitai*, *Camp de Thiaroye*). I argue that the literary and cinematic productions of Sembene invoke and construct memories that generate debate about testimony and survival. While I do not disagree with Samba Gadjigo who has defined Sembene's fiction as self-defense literature and proposes that he became an author in order to escape his situation as a docker in Marseilles (2004), I go on to show that, throughout Sembene's forty-eight year literary career, he creates an aesthetics of memory that writes back both to the Hexagon and his own African and Caribbean counterparts.

The dissertation further shows that Sembene proposed his own theory of writing in which fiction meets (auto)biography. In the introductory chapter, I trace this theory to the preface of *L'Harmattan* (1964); this theorizing is further developed eighteen years down the line in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. Thus, Sembene becomes the critic of his own writing and describes his ideal readers as he designates a number of theorists, many of who engaged in prolific writing even as they enjoyed remarkable political careers (Nyerere, Nkrumah, Cabral, Senghor, Mondlane, Césaire).

I observe that, apart from a quest for self-identity within the realm of the imaged and the imagined, Sembene's aesthetics of memory and history further opens the door to the study of auto-referentiality, the author as a survivor, and writing as testimony. The main hallmarks of this aesthetics (as they emerge in my study) are: fictionalization of history; historicization of fiction; interweaving memory and (inter)textuality; and the omnipresence of trauma in fiction. This highlights the importance of Sembene's literary and cinematic production in postcolonial studies.

INDEX WORDS: Postcolonial, Trauma, Fictionalization, Historicization, Intertextuality, Madness, Self-referentiality, Proselytization, Signifier, Futurity.

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PETER MWAURA GACHANJA

B.Ed, Kenyatta University, Nairobi-Kenya, 1998

M.A., University of Georgia, USA, 2009

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PETER MWAURA GACHANJA

Major Professor:	Rachel Gabara
Committee:	Jan Pendergrass
	Timothy Raser
	Richard Neupert

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ousmane Sembene (1923-2007) enjoyed a long literary and cinematic career that spanned over a period of forty-eight years.¹ The immensity of his success is attested to by the attention that his work has attracted in literary journals and colloquia all over the world. For example, in the African continent, it is common practice to introduce students early to Sembene's more acclaimed titles such as *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), *L'Harmattan* (1963) and *Le Mandat* (1966), texts which have now become the core of a literary canon that is studied in high school and university curricula. Indeed, few African authors match Sembene's stature and popularity. Manifold reasons can be given for this, the most important being the linguistic accessibility of his texts, a general feeling of the relevance of his themes, as well as his eclectic style. Yet, until the year 2000, comprehensive and in-depth criticism of Sembene's artistic accomplishments was scarce and inadequate.² Even more perplexing is the fact that well-known critics of African Francophone literature such as Bernard Mouralis completely excluded Sembene from their studies.³ A more common tendency, however, was to pigeon-hole Sembene

¹ Sembene's first novel, *Le docker noir*, was published in 1956, while his last feature film, *Moolaadé*, was released in 2004.

² That is, considering Sembene's prolific productions throughout the 1960s up to the new millennium. David Murphy challenged this trend in criticism when he wrote a comprehensive book of Sembene's work. See *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (2000). More recently, Amadou Tidiane Fofana adopted Murphy's approach to his exclusive study of Sembene's cinematic productions. See *The Films of Ousmane Sembene: Discourse, Culture and Politics* (2012).

³ Mouralis has critiqued many Francophone African authors, the most notable ones being Valentin Yves Mudimbe and Mongo Beti, both of whom are Sembene's contemporaries.

in hasty categorizations - such as the all too familiar *auteur engagé*.⁴ This tradition is an old one, and it is best exemplified by Robert Pageard's dismissal of Sembene as a mere dogmatist: "son oeuvre a la fraîcheur et l'agressivité des églises naissantes" (71).⁵ This statement attains a total ironical value when one considers Sembene's attitude towards all kinds of dogma towards which he is either coldly indifferent or out-rightly cynical, as I shall show in this dissertation.

It is true that, early in his writing career, Sembene himself stated the philosophy of his art in socio-cultural terms. Thus, identifying himself as a modern griot (the custodian of customs, an oral historian and the witness of important events), Sembene opens his novel *L'Harmattan* (1964) by defining the philosophy of his writing as follows: "La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement: rester au plus près du réel et du peuple" (9). This commitment to remain true to certain realities ("le réel") has led many critics to exaggerate Sembene's social undertakings, downplaying the artistic merits of his literary and cinematic productions. Such hasty analyses have led to over-simplistic approaches to Sembene's work that David Murphy contests: "Sembene's work is far more complex than the tag of social realist allows" (7). Murphy observes further that it would be naïve to overstate the influence that works of fiction can have in fashioning social consciousness: "even if one accepts such an influence, it is impossible to quantify the phenomenon" (221).

My dissertation proposes an in-depth study of five important texts of Sembene: *Le Dernier de l'Empire* (1981), *Ceddo* (1976), *Emitai* (1973), *Vehi-Ciosane* (1966) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988). Although my main focus will be to explore the aesthetics of history and memory in these texts, I shall demonstrate how Sembene's style is totally interconnected with his

⁴ See Martin Bestman. *Sembene Ousmane et l'esthétique du roman Negro-africain*. Quebec: Naaman, 1981.

⁵ Pageard's analysis reveals his own Eurocentric expectations about African literature. For example, in a startling study of the relationship between Ibrahima Bakayoko, Penda and Ndeye Touti in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Pageard accuses Sembene of sympathizing with polygamy, a practice that he actually castigates in all his works.

conception of textuality as it appears in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. The dissertation comprises of four chapters that include this introduction. Each of the three subsequent chapters begins with a theoretical background. My study will have the unique feature of incorporating an analysis of *Le Dernier de l'Empire* in each chapter, and this will serve as a connecting tissue that should demonstrate the close relationship between Sembene's prose and cinematic texts. I shall put forward a two-fold explanation to this intertextual structure of the dissertation. First, I argue that the best way to study Sembene's literary and cinematic productions is to read them as one complete entity. Indeed, Sembene, the master mason, created a big edifice of literary and cinematic works that are linked in many ways. Also, in choosing this structure of my study, I have been guided by Sembene's artistic practice which is hinged on a complex theory that he expounds in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. I observe that this "theoretical prominence" of that particular novel has escaped all the critics whose texts I have read.

If Sembene gives a brief insight into the philosophy of his art in the preface of *L'Harmattan*, he waits for eighteen years of prolific writing and film-making before postulating a more substantial theory of *his own* understanding of the nature and value of writing and reading. It is in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* that he defines his ideal reader even as he unveils his own convictions about writing (a profession and an act of survival) as well as the role of the (African) writer. Furthermore, if *L'Harmattan's* preface begins with a cautionary statement ("*Je ne fais pas la théorie du roman africain*"), *Le Dernier de l'Empire* achieves the opposite effect in the guise of a marvelous and moving fictional story. Therefore, a careful study such as the one that I undertake in this dissertation reveals that the philosophy that Sembene spells out in *L'Harmattan* does not mean that the "réel" he invokes is a mirror-like representation of events. Rather, this "réel" is subjected to subtle modifications so that historical events may be used as a

recognizable point of reference without interfering with the artistic qualities of a novel, a short story or a film.

As my dissertation sets out to show, neither Sembene's artistic philosophy nor the theory in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* are axiomatic, meaning that no good critique of Sembene's work can be obtained by taking, say, *L'Harmattan's* preface as an inflexible, quasi-religious statement. In order to explain this, I will propose relevant biographical details that show how Sembene's art is influenced by his many careers as well as his ever-developing sociopolitical positions. Many critics celebrate the fact that Sembene worked as a driver-mechanic, a mason, a longshoreman and then a trade unionist before embarking on writing/directing. This itinerant professional life sometimes came out of necessity, but his biography, as recorded by Samba Gadjigo, shows that Sembene was a natural defiant (he calls himself "un homme de refus"), which may have led to his dissatisfaction with belief systems: born as a Muslim, he later espoused Marxism before settling on the kind of detached atheism that is associated with his socially-conscious characters in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. It also explains the fiery nature of his earlier productions such as *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, his impatience with religious beliefs in *Vehi-Ciosane*, and his acute interrogation of proselytization in *Ceddo*. Yet, for all that, his depiction of minorities (such as Catholics in Senegal) is nothing but sympathetic – so that, even if the lonely priest in *Ceddo* engages in insane day-dreaming, he does not give way to the kind of megalomaniac violence associated with the Imam in the same film. This temperance gives way to Sembene's artistic vision of a pluralistic and tolerant society in works such as *Faat Kiné* (2000), a film in which a practicing Roman Catholic dates a Muslim woman (Kiné), yet the youth in the film is not bothered by religious beliefs or the lack of them.

The multi-faceted nature of Sembene's writing implies that one cannot arrive at a productive analysis of his texts if a single theoretical approach is used to understand them. For that reason, my study will incorporate a variety of theories such as psychoanalysis (Fanon, Freud), postcolonial theory (Albert Memmi, V.Y Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, Anthony Appiah, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said) as well as trauma theory (Cathy Caruth, Feldman Shoshana). Again, this is largely informed by Sembene's writing itself; for, in almost all his major works, certain characters demonstrate the propensity to read and share some interesting texts, a fact that should not be overlooked. For example, in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ibrahima Bakayoko has an impressive library from which the striking railway workers borrow titles such as André Malraux's *La Condition Humaine*. In the film *Camp de Thiaroye*, Sergeant Aloyse Diatta shares a copy of Vercors' *Le Silence de la mer* with Captain Raymond. More pertinently, it is in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* that theoretical texts erupt in the middle of fiction: socially-conscious men (and women) such as the journalist Kad and Cheikh Tidiane Sall read Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral and Franz Fanon. This theoretical textuality is taken even further when the journalist Kad chooses his interviewees: "Il n'avait rencontré que six leaders qui l'aient impressionné par leur maturité, leur naturel et leur quête d'une réponse exacte: Franz Fanon, Nkrumah, Mondlane, Julius Nyerere, Néto, et Amilcar Cabral" (Vol. II 33).⁶ I would like to make a quick observation here, whose gist is developed later in the following chapters: apart from Nkrumah, all the other leaders in this list were born in the early 1920s, and Sembene identifies himself with that generation that he refers to as "les anciens". Equally worthwhile to

⁶ All these men were prominent political theorists, and they were also involved in anti-colonialist movements in their countries. Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) was the first president of Ghana, Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973) was a freedom fighter and political leader in Guinea-Bissau, Julius Nyerere (1922-1999) was the first president of Tanzania, Agostino Neto (1922-1979) was the first president of Angola. Edouardo Mondlane (1920-1969) was the president of Angola. In the volume I am using, the name of Mondlane has been misspelt as "Moldane." Franz Fanon (1925-1961) was a Martinique-born psychiatrist whose writings have greatly influenced literary theorists.

note is the fact that this first generation of African leadership was completely immersed in creative writing. Again, for reasons that are discussed in detail later in this dissertation, Sembene omits an important African leader-poet-theorist, President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal (1906-2001) who is, instead, caricatured in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*.

I will show that, in Sembene's literary and cinematic texts, the question of "who reads what" is used to do either of two things: reveal the ideological/intellectual orientation of a character, or point at a deficiency that may or may not be cerebral. Throughout this dissertation, the general principle is that in Sembene's texts, any deficiency is a pointer to the pair presence/absence, the index of memory.⁷ Thus, in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, President Léon Mignane gives Cheikh Tidiane Sall the works of Lenin and Mao as a mocking way of protest after the two differ politically. A superficial reading is enough to reveal that the President is expressing a politico-intellectual misunderstanding, but this supercilious gesture also reveals – by trying to camouflage – his obsequiousness vis-à-vis (capitalist) Europe, which then becomes a matter of national concern because Senegal has not yet forgotten the evils of colonization. In this case as in many others, the act of giving (and receiving) a text is a signifier of "that which is absent"; it is as if, as a physical presence, the text should always be approached with caution because of what it is capable of hiding.

Following the model outlined above, I will argue that, in Sembene's texts, overabundance is actually the signifier of lack (an index of memory or forgetfulness). In all the texts in this study, leaders who have too many titles (such as The Venerable One, His Excellency, Father of the Nation) emerge as anemic-amnesiac. Yet again, in texts such as *Ceddo* and *Vehi-Ciosane*, textuality is associated with outright madness. For example, in *Vehi-Ciosane*, the fact that Djibril Diob spends all his time reading the Quran results in madness and multiple crimes that culminate

⁷ Chapter two discusses this relationship in detail.

in homicide and suicide. Indeed, the monotonous consumption of that particular text emerges as an integral part of the madness to which Ngoné war Thiandum and her son Teno Diob are subjected.

While this “textual insanity” can be explained in biographical terms (Sembene was a die-hard Marxist for a long time), I observe an additional element to his conception of texts: just as there are many authors, there has to be many texts, and hence no book can universally replace all others. Indeed, texts become the agents of madness when they are elevated to an exclusive level where all others have to be destroyed. That is why the Imam in *Ceddo* must do violent and insane acts such as burning people in their houses, at night, in order to establish a religion – which, once again, is based on the singularity of a text. Since proselytization is an act of replacement, Sembene seems to be suggesting that all texts (and beliefs) would be best regarded as palimpsests; to him, there is nothing like an *immutable one and only* because another one already existed before. For that reason, I pay special attention to the indicators of threatened memories – such as the *Samp* that features prominently in the film *Ceddo*.⁸ To take the argument a little further, I propose that Sembene the writer knew the dangers behind the blind consumption of texts. That being the case, an African reader would conclude that Sembene uses madness metaphorically in order to warn against events such as the ones that took place in Mali very recently, where fanatical Jihadists demolished ancient libraries with the goal of annihilating some valuable texts, all in the name of eliminating competition for one “special” text.

This dissertation will treat an additional dimension of Sembene’s writing, which I will call “writing as testimony.” As the basis of this, I will, once again, invoke Sembene’s conception of his art as the work of a griot whom he defines in *L’Harmattan* as “le témoin de chaque événement. C’est lui qui enregistrait, déposait devant tous, sous l’arbre du palabre, les

⁸ The *Samp* is a special stuff which is only associated with the ceddo social group. See chapter 4.

faits et gestes de chacun” (9). The key word here is “le témoin” – the witness. The eye is given such a remarkable prominence in Sembene’s literary and cinematic texts that it assumes another identity, that of the subject “I”. I will show how “that which is seen” and “the one that sees” are described with an insistence that leaves no doubt as to their intentionality. Such an insistence of the seeing/seen elements also gives Sembene’s texts their characteristic, provocative images which, as Amadou Fofana observes, are geared to “linger in [...] minds in order to provoke reflection” (11). To go back to the “job description” that Sembene designs for the writer/witness, it is worthwhile to note that the French verb “enregistrer” means both to memorize and to record, acts which the West African griot must learn to do simultaneously if he is to succeed in his profession. The griot “sees” and “remembers” in order to “make others see once again”, to remind them. The verb “deposer” also has multiple meanings, the most striking ones being “to deposit” and “to dismantle.”

A witness who “sees, remembers, dismantles and deposits everyone’s actions and gestures” must necessarily be uncompromising and a bit cruel. For this reason, a typical Sembenian text is full of the imprints of trauma. In a different but relevant context, T. Okere (1978) addresses what he refers to as “the peculiar originality of African culture” which resides in:

The [...] trauma of the slave trade, of the humiliation that was colonization, of assault on traditional religion, of new won political independence, of present economic exploitation, of the ambivalent status of standing hesitatingly on the threshold of the age of industry (279).

This citation sums up all the areas in which one can locate the memories that form the core of Sembene's aesthetics. The question of "how much" African people should remember has been discussed for a long time, and the most quoted answers can be exemplified by Jomo Kenyatta's (in)famous "*tusahau yaliyopita tujenge taifa*" ("let's forget the past and build our nation"). To such attempts at "silencing" memory in the early 1960s, artists like Sembene responded with a resounding: we shall not forget. Or rather, it is not the prerogative of a political power to decide what a nation should remember or forget, because, as Edward Casey (2000) states, "our memories are upto us" (52). To disclaim one's memories is to stifle an important component of the Self as well as the collectivity to which the individual belongs.

If the type of memories that Okere enumerates must be described as traumatic, one can understand why Sembene's fiction has been defined as "self-defense literature" (Samba Gadjigo 2001, 142). Underneath this statement, I observe a subtext, which is a theory of authorship that reads: Sembene became an author in order to escape his situation as a docker in Marseille (ibid.). In order to understand the full import of this correlation of the author's biography and his writing, I will emphasize on some traces of autobiography in all the texts I am studying. Equally important is the fact that Sembene tends to identify with his own fictional characters, and that is why he features as one of the actors in almost all his films. However, apart from this quest for self-identity within the realm of the imaged and the imagined, this style also opens the door to the study of auto-referentiality as an indicator of survival and witnessing.

In order to treat Sembene's aesthetics of memory, I will subdivide each chapter into sub-units. Thus, in chapter two, I will discuss how history is transformed and fictionalized even as memory acts as trauma in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* and *Camp de Thiaroye*. Chapter three shows how memory operates within the realms of spirituality and truth-speaking in *Vehi-Ciosane*,

Emitai and *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. If I have inverted the order in which the texts appear in that chapter, it is because I read *Vehi-Ciosane* as a harbinger, a text that anticipates others. Again, the spirituality in question here is an artistic one because anything that is treated by Sembene's pen or camera must be subjected to very fundamental changes. The fourth chapter shows how memory and textuality act as the agents of madness in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* and *Ceddo*. All these chapters show that, by manipulating such geographical spaces, mental dispositions and spiritual convictions (or lack of them), Sembene multiplies possibilities of authorship and readership even as he unites the past, the present and the future in fascinating artistic texts.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY FICTIONALIZED AND MEMORY ACTING AS TRAUMA

In postcolonial studies, there has been a growing interest in the question of suppressed memory and what this portends to personal identities, national identities and literary criticism itself. Borrowing from philosophy, psychoanalysis and socio-psychology, postcolonial theorists have associated suppression of personal and/or collective memory with the crises of identity that are often represented in the literary productions of almost all prominent African writers. Of particular pertinence to this study is the fact that, as Sembene's fiction forcefully writes back to an uproarious culture that had hitherto remained unanswered, the curtain between history and fiction is reduced as memory manifests itself as trauma. This can be partly explained by the nature of the colonial enterprise: in trying to endow themselves with a formidable self-identity, colonialists resorted to inflating their own personal and collective memories even as they simultaneously did everything to promote amnesia among the colonized.⁹

This should help to explain the Sembenian tendency to destroy any and all relics of the colonial empire – such as Faidherbe's monument whose fall is celebrated towards the end of *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. If the urban youth in novels such as *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* and *Le Dernier de l'Empire* tend to be particularly hostile towards any remnants of French occupation in their country, it is precisely because, for decades, the colonial empire continuously assaulted their past and threatened their very identity with impunity. Pierre Nora argues that monuments demonstrate allegiance to the past because “memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces,

⁹ Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* anatomizes the decrepitude that arises from such a situation. Memmi's seminal study will be quoted throughout this dissertation.

gestures, images and objects.” As *Le Dernier de l’Empire* demonstrates, a street called Georges-Pompidou in the middle of Dakar arouses acrimonious memories among the Senegalese. As a way of sanitizing such invaded spaces, Sembene’s literary and cinematic productions tend to ravage the referents of colonial dominion both linguistically and physically. In *Critical Encounters*, Cathy Caruth states that, as a work of art, a statue “gives a face to a dead or abstract entity” (131). Giving the dead a face often translates to giving them a voice. In Sembene’s fiction, a colonialist’s statue in an African city emerges as a cynical representation of a dead empire that still claims the right to pontificate to an unwilling citizenry.

This politically-motivated assault on the colonized is a kin to what Paul Ricoeur refers to as “the mobilization of memory in the service of the quest, the appeal, the demand for identity” (81). In other words, in order to stomp his own presence and eject the colonized from his own country, the colonizer fills the colony with his own history, which includes the naming of streets, the erection of monuments and the establishment of his own language at the expense of the Other’s culture.¹⁰ By so doing, the colonizer lives in an imaginary colony where the colonized does not exist; his monuments fill his gaze with his own image. On the other hand, as Memmi observes, the colonized is ostracized historically: “La carence la plus grave subie par le colonisé est d’être placé hors de l’histoire et de la cité” (112). The colonized therefore carries the burden of history only as its object. The imperious self-identity is nurtured by memories of its own glory, which automatically implies that the Other’s memory must be annihilated and his sense of identity vitiated. To some extent, Sembene’s fiction tends to restore such threatened memories and re-create distorted identities while it deconstructs and undermines colonial cultural-ideological relics. More specifically, Sembene inspires himself from real events which he

¹⁰ The complete value of this “Other” is interesting, given that the African is in his own country, so that it is the otherizing culture that is alien.

fictionalizes. Conversely, he sometimes uses fiction to represent real events as they unfold in human existence.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the pleasure of writing poetry (or fiction) chiefly in terms of the association between representation through reproduction of action. Commenting on the status of the poet (meaning fiction writer), Aristotle states that “even if on occasion he takes real events as the subject of a poem, he is none the less a poet, since nothing prevents some of the things that have actually happened from being the sort that might *probably* or *possibly* happen” (51b 27-32).¹¹ Furthermore, to Aristotle, while the historian tells of things that have passed, the fiction writer is more prestigious because *he tells such things as might be* as opposed to merely chronicling things as they have been. This representation is what Aristotle calls *mimesis*, which he goes ahead to equate to “creation of plots” (*muthos*). As I shall show in this chapter, this transformation of reality into fiction and vice-versa forms the backbone of *Le Dernier de l'Empire* and *Camp de Thiaroye*.

Sembene bases all his plots within a very specific geographical space – the so-called French West Africa – and therefore his characters must be located within the traumatic experience of (post)colonialism. This also implies that, as a locus, the nation is more than just a geographical space: it is a very specific center of contestation and artistic imagination. Now, the relationship between the existence of colonial empires and amnesia has been explained in materialist terms since the 1950s. Contrary to any claims of the so-called civilizing mission, colonization had no justification other than European powers’ strong desire to be rich at the expense of the colonized.¹² The social theorist Albert Memmi defines the colony as a place

¹¹ My own emphasis.

¹² The French were particularly prone to justifying their atrocious acts in the colonies by alluding to “*la mission civilisatrice*”. Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950) was one of the earliest brutal attacks on this

where one earns more and spends less (34).¹³ In fact, the colonialist's existence is an instrumental one: it is emblemized by profit, privilege and usurpation (38). Therefore, the imperialist enterprise is naturally crumbly because the colonizer would cease to exist once the colonized dematerializes. The balance between the two distinct identities of colonizer-colonized is maintained only as long as inequality is taken as a fact of life. Memmi uses a mercenary paradigm to simplify his argument: the colonizer is rich only because the colonized is poor:

Si son niveau de vie est élevé, c'est parce que celui du colonisé est bas; s'il peut bénéficier d'une main-d'œuvre, d'une domesticité nombreuse et peu exigeante, c'est parce que le colonisé est exploitable [...] et non protégé par les lois de la colonie (37).

Thus, a situation where the colonized would have any dignity is inconceivable and untenable in the colonial economy. Ironically, the two complimentary identities of colonizer-colonized are only maintained through the colonized person's acquiescence; he provides cheap labor so that his nemesis can continue existing as such.

However, what the colonialist cannot tolerate is the constant gaze of the colonized – whom he perceives as “a necessary Other” – who is actually in his own country, and whose role is to serve as the colonizer's alter-ego. The colonizer is aware of his position as a conceited alien who is subjected to an accusing look of the colonized. This scrutinizing look permeates African literature and renders itself as an apt medium of expressing the colonial experience as an indelible memory. Ferdinand Oyono's novel, *Une vie de boy* (1956) illustrates and dramatizes this uneasy situation. The novel recounts the story of Toundi, a houseboy who is destroyed by his colonial masters simply because he cannot help seeing what *they* are doing. Toundi's eyes

“mission”. In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, Sembene openly refers to African (and Caribbean) writers who followed Césaire's trend, repeating the names of Franz Fanon, Nkrumah and Cabral over and over.

not only accuse and remind Mme Decazy of her adultery; they also reveal a desire to occupy a position other than that which is designated for him by the colonial system. In order to reassure themselves and perpetuate their own privileged position, the colonialists in *Une vie de boy* resort to torture, imprisonment and murder. But, as the novel demonstrates, such a solution is self-defeatist.

The problem that Oyono dramatizes in *Une vie de boy* is the absurdity of the colonial situation itself: the colonizer who kills the colonized is committing suicide, both economically and morally. When Toundi dies in exile, he leaves behind a diary which inspires the narrator in the novel. The economy of the whole novel revolves around Toundi's memories: without the memories of the murdered houseboy, the novel would never have existed. To take the argument a little further, what Oyono successfully demonstrates in *Une vie de boy* is that colonialism inevitably inspires a literature which must be antithetical to it. That is why the curtain that separates historicization of fiction and fictionalization of history emerges as a thin one in the works of writers such as Oyono and Sembene – writers who draw from and answer to memories of colonization as a personal as well as collective experience.

Many African authors who witnessed colonialism were mostly involved in struggles of national liberation. To such authors, the problematic of identity is always closely linked to that of the retention and/or loss of memory. Theorizing about such situations, Paul Ricoeur observes that a poorly-tolerated Other inspires insecurity in the Self, resulting in a “fragile identity” (81). In the colonial context, Memmi designates a similar phenomenon as “le complexe de Néron” (76). Nero continually tormented Britannicus because the innocence of the former reminded the Emperor that he was a tyrant. In the same way, the colonialist tries to annihilate the colonized in order to absolve his own illegitimate privilege. Furthermore, like Nero, the colonialist must

continually glorify himself and deprecate the colonized: “Il s’efforce de falsifier l’histoire, il fait récrire les textes, il éteindrait des mémoires. N’importe quoi, pour arriver à transformer son usurpation en légitimité (77).

Such a status quo inevitably leads not only to the kind of physical violence seen in *Une vie de boy* and *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, it also plays into the manipulation of memory in order to cloak the ensuing injustices:

What we celebrate under the heading of founding events are, essentially, violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right, acts legitimated, at the limit [...] by their age. The same events are thus found to signify glory for some, humiliation for others. To their celebration, on the one hand, corresponds their execration, on the other. It is in this way that real and symbolic wounds are stored in the archives of collective memory (82).

What this reveals is the fact that, as a method of forming exclusive social groups, dichotomization cultivates two different frameworks: the so-called civilizing race and the uncivilized one. The first one has a memory; the second one has none. Hegemony dictates that imperialist memorialization has to be Janus-faced; the heroic exploits of the dominating culture are applauded as the Other is simultaneously degraded. The “uncivilized” culture is stigmatized, its social values are de-valorized and, with time, any existing social frameworks degenerate through disuse. Cultural amnesia attains its summit when language is killed, undermining social cohesion for good. Maurice Halbwachs maintained that there can be no memory without adequate social interaction. For, although only individuals remember, they cannot do this outside society. Yet, as I have mentioned, colonization functions principally by continually

attacking the social fabrics of the colonized societies, hoping to kill them. As Aimé Césaire demonstrates in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, the “civilizing mission” only ends up de-civilizing and reifying both the colonized and the colonizer. Those who survive such experiences cannot forget them, yet their memories traumatize them.

That is why writers who inspire themselves from the colonial experience cannot help but represent memory as a traumatic phenomenon from which characters constantly try to free themselves. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Gadjigo (2001) interprets Sembene’s fiction as “a self-defence literature” (142). The same critic argues that Sembene became a writer in order to escape his situation as a docker in Marseille (*ibid*). If that is the case, the contrast dominion/insubordination that functions as a trope in Sembene’s fiction could be an escape from traumatizing memories. In a way, Sembene is a testifying survivor who creates plots in which survivors like himself tell their stories in order to deal with traumatic experiences.

1.1 *Le Dernier de l'Empire*

In *Le Dernier de l'Empire* (1981), six tumultuous decades of a country’s history are examined largely through the memories of an old statesman, Cheikh Tidiane Sall (also known as *Joom Gallé*).¹⁴ The novel operates around the imprints that traumatic experience leaves on the various characters, especially Tidiane, as time assumes the role of a space through which memory travels. Actually, by the end of the novel, Tidiane gives his memoirs the same title as Sembene’s novel, which in itself can be interpreted as one of the major doubling of identities that reinforce the pairs: memory/forgetfulness and presence/absence. These pairs, which function in tandem throughout the novel, nurture one another so that *that which is forgotten* only highlights

¹⁴ Tidiane’s most active memories date back to 1914, the year during which he goes to study in France under the guise of fighting for his *patrie*. The actual disappearance of Léon Mignane is not dated in the novel, but I propose that this event could not have taken place before 1979. This is because the narrator indicates that Mignane disappears after Kenya’s president Jomo Kenyatta’s death, which happened in 1978.

that which is remembered, and *that which is absent* is so glaringly present that it ends up pointing to itself. The overall effect, therefore, is to foreground absence in order to problematize memory and demystify writing.

The intrigue behind *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is simple: a Senegalese president, Léon Mignane, disappears one Thursday night without leaving a trace. Confronted by the presence of his empty throne very early Friday morning, Mignane's young ministers' immediate reaction is horror, numbness and mental paralysis. The ministers verbalize the possible explanations to this absence: the president could be kidnapped or dead, otherwise he may be playing a dirty ploy on everyone. Yet, as the reader quickly realizes, none of Mignane's young Turks is willing to accept any of these possibilities. The reason is that Léon Mignane has never prepared any of them to be an acceptable Head of State. Instead, he has divided the cabinet into two camps. One of these recognizes the Prime Minister, Daouda, as the rightful successor of Mignane. In fact, the country's constitution stipulates that the Prime Minister should succeed the president should the need arise. But the other camp, led by the Minister of Finance Mam Lat Soukabé, refuses to acknowledge Daouda simply because the latter is a *gewel* (a griot) by birth, and hence an inferior man.¹⁵ In the president's presence, the two sides fight for leadership: "La course pour la succession [...] était ouverte bien avant ce vendredi matin" (Vol. 1, 10). In private, the president has promised each of the two men the presidency. Although Léon Mignane praises Daouda and Mam Lat separately, he uses everything at his disposal to fan the flames of discord in the two camps.

¹⁵The caste system of Wolof society is divided into the nobles (*geer*), the professional or artisanal non-nobles (*nyenyo*) and the *jaam* (slaves). Mam Lat's family occupies the highest echelon of nobility, the *guel* (princes). Griots (*gewel*) belong to the *nyenyo* caste together with woodworkers and leatherworkers. This casting based on artisanal identity is hereditary, and an individual cannot move from one caste to another. Daouda is a *gewel* (a griot) by birth. His father, Gorgui Massamba was a praise-singer for the Ayanes dynasty to which Mam Lat belongs.

In short, the president's abrupt exit spells disaster. His disappearance from a political scene that he has hitherto dominated becomes a major turning point in everybody's life. Jacques Lacan teaches that the true site of trauma lies in awakening rather than dreaming. As long as Léon Mignane sits on the throne, his ministers are lured into a stupor, dreaming away their poorly-formulated ambitions. The president's departure throws them into sudden wakefulness. In fact, from now onwards, all Mignane's ministers suffer from insomnia. For the first time, they become fully aware that they are all insufficient and insecure. To begin with, none of them has ever faced the electorate. Secondly, if it turns out that the president is gone for good, they stand to inherit big financial problems. As Mam Lat declares, the country is bankrupt: "La cause de cette fuite serait la banqueroute. Le pays est hypothéqué pour deux générations" (Vol. 1 131/132). The Minister for Finance is right in the sense that Mignane's government survives on loans from the I.M.F and the World Bank. Almost all African countries fell into this trap since the early 1960s, a trend that continues to this day. But, at the same time, Mam Lat is confusing cause for effect; Leon Mignane does not care about economics. The narrator recounts that the president recently bought himself a Boeing as a birthday gift using public funds, and that he encourages his ministers to steal so that they can rely on him for protection. Again, this is very true in most African countries. For example, between 1978 and 2003, Daniel Arap Moi and his kleptomaniac regime destroyed Kenya's economy by looting day and night. Mignane is also acting as a typical African despot when he buys himself a private Boeing using public resources. As late as 1992, president Sam Nujoma of Namibia used public funds to buy a private jet and two helicopters, yet, at the same time, his government continued to ask for drought relief funds for Namibia. Nujoma's egocentric act and the ensuing brouhaha made Norway to withdraw its support from the starving country.

The point I am making here is that nothing shows that an ailing economy would force Mignane (or any other dictator) to vacate power. It is the Minister for Internal Security, Corr  a, who comes closer to the truth when he succinctly observes: “Un pouvoir vacant est une tentation” (Vol. 1, 30). But none of Mignane’s young Turks know for sure that the president is hiding; their vocalizations arise from fear rather than reason. Not even his personal advisor, Monsieur Adolphe, shows any presence of mind. When Mam Lat asks him to explain the disappearance of the president, Adolphe is taken aback: “Il sentait son autorit   ancienne lui glisser des mains, comme ces com  diens qui ont tr  s mal assimil   leur texte, et que tout changement de d  cor d  sar  onne” (Vol. 1, 13). Mignane’s wicked genius lies in the fact that he is the fabricator of Machiavelian scripts, such as his recent manipulation of the constitution to create an emasculated Premiership. But, by staging a Shakespearian exit, Mignane has not only changed the d  cor but the entire script.

To the young ministers, the gap that L  on Mignane’s empty throne represents is too big to be filled by any of them. The president’s own choice, Prime Minister Daouda, is particularly hopeless, regarding himself as a mere vassal: “Il   tait sans soutien, sans client  le   lectorale. Il m  surait son cr  dit d’homme lige” (Vol. 1, 212). Although Daouda has the physical height of a giraffe, he is more of a moral dwarf who has elevated Mignane to the Almighty: “Une   quipe serait n  cessaire pour remplacer le V  n  rable. Un seul homme n’a ni l’envergure ni la culture qui le caract  risent” (ibid.). Daouda’s faintheartedness stems from total dependence on his tutelary. Assuming god-like pretensions, Mignane has nicknamed his Premier David-Daouda, doubling the Islamic appellation with its Judaist original. But, while the biblical prototype was chosen because of his courage, Daouda is exceptionally cowardly: “Corr  a le regardait avec fixit  . La vuln  rabilit   du Chef du gouvernement ne lui   chappait pas” (Vol. 1, 213). However,

Daouda has yet another insufficiency, one that he can do nothing about. Mam Lat bullies him, revealing what nobody else dares to formulate in words: “Tu es un homme de basse extraction [...] Tu ne seras jamais à la tête de ce pays. Un casté!” (Vol. 1, 137). Yet, behind Mam Lat’s cockiness, the reader discovers an insufficient man who secretly hopes that His Excellency returns sooner or later. In the whole cabinet, all the twenty-one young Turks are unable to analyze the situation or to respond to it maturely.

It takes an older man and Mignane’s close friend, Cheikh Tidiane Sall, to see the possibility of a real ruse in the whole dramatic absence. As he quietly witnesses the young Turks’ cacophonous fights, the skeptical Tidiane wonders to himself: “Un président de la République qui se volatilize? Subterfuge? [...] Dans quel bout?” (Vol.1, 81). The brevity of the sentences that Sembene uses to describe Tidiane’s thoughts underline the old man’s profound understanding of Léon Mignane’s character: there must be a devious plot behind the president’s absence. Another factor accentuates Tidiane’s suspicion: the discovery of Siin’s corpse inside Mignane’s car. Tidiane tells Djia Umrel Ba: “Léon s’est volatilisé et [...] son chauffeur a été occis” (Vol. 2, 14). In a more fearful tone, Daouda himself wonders: “Se souvient-on d’un fait analogue dans l’histoire? Un président de la République cavale, sans trace? Pourquoi? [...] Et ce chauffeur tué?” (Vol. 1, 118).

Mignane’s missing body is dramatically and symbolically transposed with that of his driver Siin. His Excellency and his driver are metaphorically linked in their absence. The two men are missing, but not in the same way. For the dead Siin is absent in the sense that his family has lost its breadwinner for good. As the president engages in a theatrical enactment of his own erasure, Siin has been murdered, leaving behind three wives and twenty-five children. Still, while Siin’s body is found and given its rightful final rights, Mignane’s theatrical self-erasure

later assumes a more spiritual loss because he will be deported from Senegal. Mignane's missing body is the mark of trauma per excellence: it is indeed the referent for the unknown, the incomprehensible. Like memory, Mignane is an absence that is present. Furthermore, *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is indeed a story entrenched in trauma, about trauma. The novel starts with a tense atmosphere that is engendered by an unexplained disappearance, only to end with a departure. For, Mignane's brief return towards the end of the novel is not a return at all; he has been captured from his hiding only to be put in jail. To be imprisoned is to be removed from society. To be exiled is to be taken away from society. Mignane's acted absence is therefore redoubled and reinforced in a fundamental way, one which he could not have foreseen.

The seemingly discordant couples in the novel – most notably Tidiane/Mignane – often complot unknowingly, and this accentuates the story's breathless disposition. Through them, Sembene interrogates the origins and validity of personal as well as collective memory, interweaving this with a theory of writing - both as a profession and an invaluable pastime. In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, memory, in its true nature, emerges as an aporia because it is nothing but the nagging presence of an absence. This theoretical impasse culminates in the morally-questionable coup d'état that is carried out by Col. Mané and his colleagues, creating more doubt than any real (or acceptable) resolutions to the political questions raised in the story.

Within this framework, my reading of the novel points at a rejection of closure; for the quandary of the presence/absence of an inept Head of State cannot be satisfactorily resolved by deporting a democratically elected leader, leaving a country *without* a government. To do so is to replace the lack of good leadership with another *void*. To support this proposition, I would like to point out that Cheikh Tidiane Sall fails to convince either the journalist Kad, Djia Umrel Ba or even himself that Col. Mané will keep his word about returning power to the civilians. Actually,

this begs the question as to why the colonel should, given the blind support that his coup receives from the youth. I will come back to this later. Of immediate importance though, is the fact that in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, absences are replaced by other absences even as what they represent evades total comprehension.

The most polysemic code in the novel, therefore, is memory itself, which is represented and amplified by absence. Most remarkably, the sudden disappearance of His Excellency Léon Mignane, the president of the Republic and Tidiane's long-term friend, creates a void that becomes the catalyst that activates Tidiane's memories. Even so, these memories of the past (*les souvenirs*) keep on disrupting the present events to the extent that Tidiane must find a way to resolve the ensuing angst which threatens his sanity and peace of mind. The logical solution to this would be to write his memoirs.

But two problems arise: one, Tidiane is a septuagenarian whose memory (*la mémoire*) has been weakened by age. Memory, which is the intention and ability to remember, is curtailed by *memories* that stand out as its obstacle, because, ironically, as the remembered things (*les souvenirs*) increase with time, the capacity to remember (*la memoire*) decreases. This is because the necessary mental structures are worn out by the passage of time. The aporia of memory is therefore compounded by the fact that time builds Tidiane's repertoire of memories even as it destroys the means to access to them, which is his memory. The second problem is that Tidiane (as he admits to his wife and later to the journalist Kad) is quite simply not a writer. His argument therefore is that, even if his memory was good, he would still lack the skills and the discipline to organize his memories into a coherent book. Consequently, a new impasse in the paired form of memory/writing is born out of this conflict.

Confronted by such obstacles, the easy way out for Cheikh Tidiane would be to give up, which is not a typical solution in Sembenian texts. At any rate, Sembene's novel shares the same title as Tidiane's memoirs, which implies that in the end the writer's artistic memory somehow coincides with Tidiane's active recollection of what would otherwise be lost to forgetfulness. In other words, in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, the artist's intelligent reconstruction of the past is first of all a way of remembering that people forget. Therefore, the blatant fictionalization of facts in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* can find its justification in the gaps that exist in personal as well as general history as Sembene understands it. However, if Sembene the novelist can afford to re-create the past, to historicize fiction as he does in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, Cheikh Tidiane Sall the memoir-writer has compelling reasons to be faithful to facts. Therefore, when Tidiane starts wondering when and why people stopped wearing helmets in Senegal, he is doing precisely what any good writer does, and that is paying attention to the commonplace. That is why Tidiane and Djia Umrel Ba develop a penchant for time-yellowed magazines, personal dairies, old speeches, photographs and newspaper cuttings: "Ils passèrent le dimanche matin à fouiller la correspondance dans les cantines, vieilles malles, armoires, dossiers ficelés"(Vol.2, 111). Photographs are particularly powerful, jolting the old couple from the present into the past with remarkable rapidity:

De temps en temps, naviguait d'une main à l'autre une photo jaunie de l'époque coloniale, une vue de l'ancien Dakar, de Saint-Louis [...], d'anciens condisciples. On interprétait, commentait, s'attardait sur l'image d'un copain disparu, sur une photo de famille, d'un ministre des colonies en tournée en Afrique...La Tour Eiffel.... Là,

nous sommes à l'Etoile [...] Notre premier voyage à bord d'un bateau" (Vol. 2, 113).

Since memoirs are the mainstay of autobiographies, Sembene seems to be suggesting that true history lies in what would appear to be trivial – such as the photographic image of a young couple on holiday. This is vocalized by Tidiane when he observes that: “La vie d'un homme est faite d'emmagasinement des choses futiles” (Vol. 2, 113). However, his son Badou tells him that to the writer, nothing is trivial.

The decision to write is therefore not entirely Cheikh Tidiane's. Actually, it is his wife, Djia Umrel Ba who suggests the idea, first of all for no better reason other than to keep her husband busy after retirement. Eventually, what started as a rather passive and spontaneous way of remembering after Mignane's disappearance is given a fuller and more robust meaning as Djia Umrel wins the support of Badou and the Director of Public Prosecutions, both of who rally behind her to push the old man into the new enterprise. Being a lawyer by training and a long-serving Minister for Justice, Tidiane's initial resistance comes from the fact that he must be completely convinced that there is need for doing something he has never done since his youth - that is, writing.

It is Ndaw, the Director of Public Prosecutions, who gives Tidiane's memoirs a moral and political necessity: “Tu as vécu le colonialisme, la période d'assimilation, l'indépendance et participé aux différents gouvernements” (Vol 1, 182). This implies that Tidiane's memories are no longer his own; rather, a completely new entity (the nation) makes a claim to them. To this nationalist appeal to personal memories, Ndaw adds another one which is pan-Africanist: “Ta vie doit être connue par toute l'Afrique” (ibid). However, Tidiane himself comes up with a more philosophically radical rationale to all this: he eventually sees writing as resistance to oblivion

and death: “Une pensée vengeresse, violente, l’explora. Se venger de l’anonymat de la mort” (ibid.). It appears, therefore, that memory keeps men and women alive in spite of death only if their memories are preserved. In other words, memory justifies writing to the extent that the resulting text defies death by speaking to the living. That being the case, writing is a violent and self-assertive act.

Sembene’s ardent fight for literacy in Senegal finds an explanation in this theory of writing, for a writer without readers is quite frankly a non-entity. In other words, written memories would have little value if they were not consumed through reading and interpretation. That is why Sembene’s characters read and quote *Sembene*. Apart acting as a cheeky response to censorship, I read this self-referentiality as an apt way of pointing to the interconnectedness and organic wholeness of Sembene’s literary monument that runs from 1956 to 2004.¹⁶ Depending on their level of social consciousness, different characters react differently to the artist’s work. Diouldé Sall sees Sembene as the enemy of his class: “Depuis le film de Sembene, *Xala*, nous, hommes d’affaires, avons changé d’appellation: Opérateurs Economiques” (Vol 2. 38). Being a bourgeois through and through, Diouldé has good reasons to abhor the maker of *Xala*, a film which depicts the African nouveau-riche of the 1960s/70s as parasitic, intellectually bankrupt and socially emasculated. Ironically, by changing their appellation from “hommes d’affaires” to “opérateurs économiques”, Diouldé and his peers only validate the writer-director’s sneering attitude towards them. Nothing changes when one rejects the label “businessman” only to become an “economic operator”. This intellectual penury is contrasted with a more socially-conscious group of young people. Of these, Kad and Badou are particularly apt to integrate

¹⁶ Censorship was rife in many African countries throughout Sembene’s writing career. His Kenyan friend, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, was imprisoned in 1977 and his books were outlawed. Later, Ngugi went on exile in Europe, then the United States. When he returned to Kenya for the first time in 2004, he and his wife were assaulted by hired thugs in the Norfolk Towers, Nairobi. Sembene’s own film, *Ceddo*, was censored by president Léopold Sédar Senghor, whose subservience to Europe is caricatured in *Le Dernier de l’Empire* in the form of Mignane.

Sembene's poetry in their own ideology. While Badou the Marxist-Communist observes that writing itself is not sufficient in changing the world, he nonetheless recites a poem by Sembene in which the African's stature finally measures up to the immensity and beauty of his continent:

*J'ai mon élan et mon envergure
A la dimension du continent
Mon souffle est à la mesure
Des vents unifiés soufflants
Des aubes aux crépuscules
Des sables nus du Sahara
Des forêts denses et velues
Des rives accidentées
De mon étreinte de ce jour...*
(Vol. 1 208).

Badou not only memorizes Sembene's poetry, he also teaches his students to appreciate it. To him, one of the most important attributes of a good author is moral consistency: "Lui au moins, on savait de quel côté de la barricade il se battait" (ibid). Kad too judges writing in terms of an author's purity of purpose and force of character: "C'était la génération des inoxydables. Une génération du bon cru" (Vol. 1, 209). His use of the imperfect in this case points at the inevitable exit of one generation to give way to another. The adjective "bon cru" refers to Sembene's well-celebrated directness, which he would most probably want to pass on to future generations. More importantly, Kad's hero (Sembene) is made of stainless steel. To some extent, this is to say that literature – the product of writing - does not rust.

Tidiane's musings about memory are fortified and echoed both by himself and other characters over and over throughout the novel. To a large extent, the intermittent rhythm of the entire story can be attributed to the old man's memories which keep on intruding into the plot. In fact, the main intrigue is rather sketchy compared to Tidiane's monumental peregrinations into the past, for they subjugate the "major" events that trigger and sustain suspense. To illustrate this, the fifteenth chapter, which is the longest, is entirely dominated by Tidiane's memories, so

that the arrival and departure of Ndaw are mere frameworks within which these memories can operate. Considering the brevity of most of the other chapters (the eighth one, for example, is barely half a page), and the short duration of time between the opening of the novel and its end (Friday to Wednesday), then one can argue that *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is very much a fictionalized theory of memory rather than just a simple story about a failed government. It emerges that, mediated by the double-edged exercise of reading-writing, memory acts as a chisel with which an individual curves his or her existence on the face of an eternity that would otherwise throw them into oblivion. This becomes clear when Badou directly quotes Sembene: “Mon existence n’a été qu’une fraction de seconde sur le cadran des siècles” (Vol. 2 69). This self-referentiality takes the argument full-circle back to its origin – that is, why should Tidiane (or Sembene) write? As we have seen, Tidiane gives an existential answer to his own question, foregrounding the writer’s fear of being forgotten. A written text, such as Tidiane’s memoirs, is therefore a kaleidoscopic sign that operates as a monument in memory.

In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, multiple voices tend to blend, disrupt and/or echo one another. For example, in the passage where Mignane manipulates Mam Lat Soukabé to oust Ahmet Ndour, the narrator changes from a neutral third person singular to a very personal “je” who relies on a rumor-mongering aunt for information:

D’une maison à l’autre, d’un village à l’autre, les transistors, de jour comme de nuit, déversèrent les mêmes émissions. Ma tante, la langue la plus venimeuse et la plus exercée de la contrée, déclarait: C’est la boîte à paroles qui nous relie à l’Indépendance... La boîte parlante qui ne

répondait jamais à nos questions, bavardait. Et ceux détenteurs de ce truc se permettait d'ajouter...

(Vol. 1, 105).

Immediately after this, the original narrator picks up his tale from where he left, and we hear nothing about the aunt until the novel is almost over, where she again appears from nowhere before disappearing once and for all.

Rather than being an exception, this trend is actually the norm in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*: Cheikh Tidiane Sall's "je" intrudes into the flow of the story from time to time. In turn, the sub-characters in Tidiane's mind interrupt his own discourse, assuming a life of their own. The most vocal of these are Pascal Wellé and Léon Mignane. Although he is long-dead, Wellé's voice explodes from the recesses of Tidiane's mind, declaring: "Je suis la synthèse!" (Vol. 1, 50).

Pascal Wellé's prominence in the old statesman's memories can be explained in two ways. First, Wellé was Tidiane's mentor and host when the latter was a student in France. Secondly, in Tidiane's mind, Wellé acts as Mignane's double because of their ideological resemblances. Yet, it so happens that, while Wellé adopts assimilationist ideals during the colonial times, Mignane should know better because he rules Senegal after the colonialists have already been forced out. The president of the Republic has therefore stagnated in a dead ideology that never worked in its own heyday.

The many voices that fight for attention in Tidiane's mind give the novel its irregular and non-linear structure: that is, the text itself has the fluidity of memories that force Tidiane back and forth in history. The old man's memories serve as a torch that illuminates current situations in order to analyze them better. That is why the couple Mignane/ Wellé is an indissoluble alloy both in the structure of the novel and in Tidiane's memories. Léon Mignane's political ideology

borrows heavily from Pascal Wellé's old convictions which are Machiavellian and self-preserving more than anything else. In 1914, when Wellé seeks the votes of white people and those of mixed race in Dakar, he says: "Je suis noir, de confession chrétienne, et lettré. J'ai une femme blanche, et des enfants métis. Alors je vous demande, quelle partie de moi dois-je assassiner?" (Vol. 1, 50). While this speech is calculated to calm the fears of Europeans and hybrids who have hitherto voted for their own, it also reveals Wellé's cunning nature: his wife and children are not viewed simply as members of a family; he uses them as bait to win an electorate. Wellé's Catholicism is not genuine either because he is the member of a Masonic lodge, which goes against the teachings of his faith. This double identity is problematic because Wellé ends up being neither one nor the other:

Décède en France, l'ancien député au Palais Bourbon,
Pascal Wellé devait être inhumé à Dakar. Catholique de
confession, le chef du clergé lui refusa les rites funèbres de
sa foi. L'évêque avec la fougue de l'orthodoxie déclara
que: "Pascal Wellé était membre actif de la Loge
maçonnique" [...] Quant au musulmans, il n'était pas
question de céder un pouce de leur cimetière à un
catholique, fut-il le noir le plus célèbre (Vol. 2, 186/187).

The couple Mignane/Wellé attains its full analogical value at the end of the novel, when the president is deported to France for good. Like Wellé, Mignane behaves like the proverbial man who tries to ride two horses at the same time, only to end up on the ground. Although he is the president of an African country, Mignane has never given up his French citizenship. While he has two houses in France, the president of the Republic does not have even one in Senegal. The

author of *Authénégrocanitus* suffers from an identity crisis. This is the root cause of the constant quarrels between him and his Minister for Justice, Cheikh Tidiane Sall who tries to disabuse his skewed foreign policy: “La France actuellement est une puissance secondaire, après l’Allemagne Fédérale, le Japon, le Canada et les U.S.A.” (Vol.1, 165). This cuts the president to the quick:

Cette attaque ouverte contre son pays chéri était une attaque à sa propre personne. Léon Mignane se sentait européen. C’était quelque chose de diffus, comme un courant marin qui palpitait dans ses veines, charriant une vapeur soporifique (ibid.).

The “soporific vapor” under whose spell the president lives is so potent that he acts like an insane man. This is because the “marine current,” meaning his imagined Europeanness, is so powerful that it sometimes drowns him to total insensitivity. If the president of the Republic can buy himself a personal Boeing, using public funds during a time when the country is suffering from food-shortage, it is because he has been numbed by his imagined Otherness. His Minister for Justice tries to reason with him: “Ce n’est pas en période de sécheresse qu’on s’offre un jouet de ce prix. Outre son prix très élevé, il y a les intérêts à payer. Qui va avaliser ce prêt?” (Vol. 1, 59). Actually, Mignane’s presidency is marked by a lack of economic policy. That is why, as Tidiane observes, everything on the president’s breakfast table is imported – including oranges that could easily be obtained in the Casamance region of the country. This desire to be an Other implies that Mignane is uncomfortable in his own skin. In *Peau Noire Masques Blancs*, Fanon gives a psychoanalytical explanation of this desire to bleach oneself:

De la partie la plus noire de mon âme, à travers la zone hachurée me monte ce désir d'être tout à coup *blanc*. Je ne veux pas être reconnu comme *Noir*, mais comme *Blanc*. Or – et c'est la une reconnaissance que Hegel n'a pas décrite – qui peut le faire, sinon la Blanche ? En m'aimant, elle me prouve que je suis digne d'un amour blanc. On m'aime comme un blanc. Je suis un Blanc (71).

Fanon is describing the agony of a black man who is obsessed with his blackness. I would like to emphasize the polysemic nature of the word “blanc” in this passage, and then associate it with Mignane's total inadequacy. Fanon uses “*blanc*” six times in this small quotation. When we add its derivative “*blanche*”, that makes a total of seven “white” elements against a single “blackness” in the psyche of one person. This claim to “whiteness” only underlines the blank space in this type of personality. True to Fanon's observation in this citation, president Léon Mignane finds the solution to his blackness in marrying a French woman whose merit, to use Fanon's term, is to *lactify* him, to cover him with her whiteness so that he can at least have a white masc. If the denied black skin cannot be bleached, it can at least be hidden underneath the desired white one. Therefore, the desire to be white begets another desire; that of being reborn by a surrogate mother-wife. It is a primitive return to the womb. Like Pascal Wellé before him, Léon Mignane can parade his new skin, in the form of Madame, in the Champs Elysées, where he badly wants to be accepted as a “Blanc”. However, Madame reads “blankness” in the word *blanc*: she has married an impotent man, a non-entity in a conjugal relationship. She starts sleeping with one of his protégés, the Minister of Finance Mam Lat Soukabé.

When Daouda catches the adulterous couple in the president's bed, his first reaction is to behave exactly like his mentor: he denies what he sees, opting instead to disgorge the experience: "Ce que ses yeux avaient vu était rejeté par son estomac" (Vol. 1, 116). Because Daouda has accepted the president as a sacred being, he fails to see the signs of Mignane's impotence in Madame's adultery. Instead, he transposes a sensory experience – "ce qu'il avait vu" – into an excretory act. Being a buccal undertaking, Daouda's vomiting replaces the analysis that should normally follow the kind of experience he has just had. He physically swallows (or vomits) what he is supposed to perceive. This emblemizes the lack of moral judgment that pervades Mignane's government. Because the president suffers from jaundice due to anemia, none of his young ministers can see properly. For example, the Minister for Internal Security's pupils are turning green due to illness, yet he cannot dare go for treatment for fear of being replaced. Consequently, the president of the Republic can vanish in the thin air, right under Corr  a's nose, in spite of the fact that he has a police and a special service section. In a way, Mignane's young Turks can only see partially, and this should only happen when His Excellency so desires.

That is why Daouda exonerates Madame at once, laying all the blame on Mam Lat: "Oser baiser la femme du president de la R  publique! Ton protecteur! Un inceste moral!" Actually, the possessive "*ton*" in Daouda's cry is ambiguous because he is speaking inwardly, to himself, even as he condemns Mam Lat. Both Daouda and Mam Lat happen to be the president's prot  g  s. Prime Minister Daouda could as well say: "*Mon* protecteur" Truly, he has taken Madame's *baisade* personally, as an insult to himself. President Mignane, the man who loves a surrogate country at the expense of the one he is ruling, has begotten a surrogate son who swallows his patriarch's marital troubles. This is a perfect case of transposition that underlines confusion. As the true scion that he is, the Prime Minister takes his Excellency's body for an

extension his own; so pained is Daouda that Mam Lat could as well have slept with his wife. If Daouda hated Mam Lat before because the latter is a *Guelwaar* (a prince) while he is himself only of *gewel* (griot) descent, he now has another reason to reinforce his hate.

The Prime Minister's gut reaction to this event changes him for good, traumatizing him. He is haunted by the memories of what he perceives as an unforgivable act against a deity. Ironically, Mignane himself has no idea that Madame is unfaithful to him. At any rate, given Mignane's psychological disposition, he is not the kind of a person who would accept that Madame could betray him. Yet Daouda is wounded so much that he cannot stand the sight of Mam Lat either in cabinet meetings or in bigger public gatherings. Interestingly, he still regards Madame as a mother figure, as if she was *not there* when it all happened. In other words, Daouda, like Mignane, denies facts even when it is not necessary. If Mignane the African president feels European enough to faint when his *pays chéri* is castigated, he finds a perfect double in his scion, Daouda, who vomits in situations where normal people simply *look*. In many African cultures, eyes are the windows of the soul – or the inner Self. By refusing to look, Daouda is abnegating that Self, opting instead to expel a sensory experience through his throat. Now, to vomit is to empty, to create a void. This is the stuff of Leon Mignane, the present/absent. To vomit is also to utter nonsense, such as Authenegrafricanitus.

We have seen that the president's solution to his "black problem" is actually a "non-solution", or the lack of a solution. According to Fanon, to substitute a foreign identity for one's own is to nullify oneself. Therefore, Mignane's wife's betrayal is another doubling of an absence – to have a husband who does not have an identity is to be delusional. In the passage quoted from Fanon, the word "blanc" can also mean "gap" or "void". By crying "Je suis un Blanc", the person in question is decrying an emptiness in the Self. Now, Mignane wants to be a black

European, a Fanonnian “*Blanc*”. In *Le Dernier de l’Empire*, this condition of being *Blanc* proves to be an abnegation of the Self. This being the case, Leon Mignane is a referent for memory, which bears with it the aporia of presence/absence. For Mignane is truly a memory in Cheikh Tidiane’s mind. In his memoirs, he will be the “last of the Empire” because the president carries himself as a mere minion of the Champs-Élysées. Anticipating the president’s definitive departure from Senegal, Elimane Gaye, Member of Parliament, says:

Nous retiendrons de lui qu’il a été, après Faïdherbe, le meilleur produit de l’ancienne métropole, et le meilleur proconsul que Paris ait envoyé en Afrique francophone (Vol. 2, 122).

To put it another way, Léon Mignane’s presence in the country is viewed as an absence because it serves no real purpose other than to perpetuate an erroneous belief in a dead empire. The president himself proves his detractors right whenever he departs from the country in order to avoid problems that require his attendance. Elimane Gaye parodies the president’s comings-and-goings: “Connais-tu le Chef d’Etat africain qui visite le plus le Sénégal? [...] C’est Léon Mignane!” (Vol. 2, 121). By talking about Mignane as a stranger who comes and goes without leaving any real impact on the country, Elimane Gaye is indeed reducing the president to the level of Monsieur Adolphe, his French advisor. When Mignane first disappears at the beginning of the novel, Adolphe is suddenly proscribed morally and physically; his status as an unwanted exile is described by the omniscient narrator: “Pour la première fois depuis des décennies de présence dans le pays, il se voyait métèque” (Vol. 1, 13). Interestingly, it is Adolphe himself who *feels* that he is an unwanted stranger. The word *métèque* is pejorative and xenophobic. Adolphe, like his employer, proscribes himself because he does not accept France’s failure to

maintain its colonies. Adolphe is a war veteran who has seen his country loose many times, first in Indochina, then in Algeria. These memories of failed war missions are at the core of Adolphe's self-denial: "L'Algérie [...] était perdue. L'orgueil blessé, traumatisé, il régagnera son pays" (Vol.1 14). Before this failure, Adolphe's pride was based solely in France's presence in the colonies. Looking at Algeria as an organic part of *his* France, Adolphe had exclaimed: "La Méditerranée traverse la France comme la Seine traverse Paris" (Vol. 1, 14). When Algeria gains independence after a protracted war with France, Adolphe is traumatized for good. Mignane's eclipse and eventual departure from Senegal proves to be an equally hard blow to his advisor because it signifies Senegal's rejection of a French proconsul as its head. It is important to note that Mignane himself is as French as Adolphe. He is *metéque* in the country he governs.

By presenting Mignane as an absentee Head of State who will nonetheless feature in someone else's memoirs, Sembene is not only reducing his presidency as a failed experiment but also as a warning against those who forget. Tidiane remembers Mignane not only on his own behalf, but because the president is a forgetting being who runs the risk of being forgotten for good. Just before His Excellency's departure, Tidiane observes: "Un chef d'Etat destitué tombe dans l'oubli" (Vol. 2, 165). Tidiane's memoirs can therefore be viewed as a gift to an old friend whom he does not wish to forget. Ironically, those same memoirs are likely to be as candid as anything Tidiane has ever said.

Mignane's biggest weakness is that he tries to deny his identity by forgetting. His amnesia helps him to manipulate people when he needs to do so, but then he fails to learn from experience precisely because he forgets his mistakes shortly after that. For example, while Mignane has forgotten what he did to Ahmet Ndour, Mam Lat Soukabé has not. In another glaring example of suicidal forgetfulness, the president teaches Daouda to feign humility in order

to survive politically, ending the lesson with: “Lorsque viendra ton heure, souviens-toi de mes paroles” (Vol. 1, 106). Yet, during the final showdown between the president and his protégé, it is Mignane who shows signs of unawareness, forgetfulness and carelessness. By making allusions to Daouda’s hereditary blotch (his father was a griot), Mignane awakens fury in a hitherto subservient disciple: “David, de la dignité! Sois un noble de Cœur au moins une fois dans ta vie. [...] David, ne te dérobe pas à tes responsabilités. Sois un *Guélwaar*” (Vol. 2, 146). By making allusions to Daouda’s *nyenyo* identity, which automatically locates him in an inferior caste, Mignane proves that he has forgotten his own lesson. Actually, the only prince in Mignane’s government is Mam Lat Soukabé, who is Daouda’s political nemesis. Leon Mignane has always pitted the two together knowing very well that, if traditions were to be strictly followed, Daouda would be Mam Lat’s praise-singer. Coming from the president’s mouth, the word *Guélwaar* is a direct insult; he is disclosing what he has always thought about Daouda. He also unknowingly unveils what Daouda has been suspecting since the president’s disappearance; that Mignane is playing some dirty game on him. Daouda explodes and beats him up. To exorcise his trauma, Daouda goes further by insulting his thankless deity: “Pédé, cocu!” (ibid.). When Daouda utters the word “cuckold”, he finally cuts the ties between him and memories that he has hitherto suppressed. In a way, he returns the bad memories to their rightful owner, that is, president Mignane. Daouda’s emotional catharsis is immediate: “Daouda respirait fort, libéré du poids de son inhibition paternelle. Il s’était exorcisé” (Vol. 2, 148).

We have seen that Léon Mignane’s split identity stems from an incomplete Europeanization, which he shares with Pascal Wellé. These two characters are the adherents of an assimilationist ideology which was propagated through the colonial schools. But the European imperialist never wanted to recognize the colonized as a human being, leave alone an

equal in the professions or in positions of leadership. In spite of this, Leon Mignane feels so completely French that even his own blood group cannot be found anywhere but Northern Europe. Responding to this ridiculous claim from one of Mignane's ministers, the ambassador Jean de Savognard observes: "Un nègre aryen, où a-t-on vu ça?" (Vol. 1, 39). By remembering Mignane as a type of Wellé, Tidiane sheds light on a whole generation of the victims of branding through mis-education. Actually, the *lettré* who were produced by the colonial schools were supposed to function neither as African nor European. Their place was well-defined: that of a subservient working class that does not have a real identity. Bernard Mouralis explains the vision of the colonial school system:

Qu'il soit instituteur ou médecin, ce dernier reste de toute façon quelle que soit sa compétence réelle dans son domaine "instituteur africain", un "médecin africain", c'est-à-dire quelqu'un qui a reçu une formation adaptée à sa situation de colonisé [...] (82).

Léon Mignane's desire to be a European engenders all the contradictions in his character and ineptitude as a leader. This desire is emblemized through his characteristic *lacks*. By letting us know that the president is anemic, the author sneeringly points at the true origin of his deficiencies – that is, his lack of a true identity. An anemic person is the one who lacks enough blood, and blood is the medium through which oxygen and nourishment travel to all the tissues of the body. If the Head of State is lacking in such a fundamental way, then it is only a matter of time before the whole body-politic collapses, and that is precisely what happens at the end of the novel. Mignane's fainting fits also point at his constant refusal to face facts. When Tidiane

confronts him about his acquiescence and subservience towards Europe, the president's immediate reaction is to switch his faculties of thinking, that is, to become unconscious. This is a blatant indication of a life in denial. Shortly after this disagreement, the president schedules a journey to the United States. Such a hasty departure is also an erasure, a denial through absence. Later, to avoid an impending retirement, Mignane pulls another absence, hides behind the scenes and awaits the ensuing social instability to become a fake coup d'état, hoping to be reinstated into office. This is a president who creates gaps in order to succeed himself. Unfortunately, Col. Mané's coup turns out to be real and very antithetical to Mignane style of doing things.

It is absenteeism and forgetfulness which undermine Mignane's presidency as well as his moral stature. That is why Sembene reduces him to a mere memory in Tidiane's mind. In fact, it is Tidiane who invited Mignane to Senegal after many years of exile in France. The same Tidiane will see him off aboard the plane that returns him to France, this time for good. Leon Mignane is the product of Tidiane's gaze. The president is *un fait secondaire* because he is born and developed through another character's consciousness. While Tidiane will overcome his own trauma by writing the story that he remembers, Mignane's amnesia culminates in definitive exile. As a young man, Tidiane initiated his own redemption, which he situated in memory. When his brothers fell during the First World War even as he enjoyed scholarships, the young Tidiane cried to Pascal Wellé: "Il aura fallu combine de morts africains pour que moi, je puisse accéder aux études supérieures?" (Vol. 1, 53). Later, just after handing in his resignation, Tidiane follows the same line of self-assessment: "De 1914 à ce jour, il n'avait été qu'un tronc flottant, servant à aider les autres à traverser la barre" (Vol. 1, 55). Tidiane Sall's constant self-criticism leads him to realize that he acted as Mignane's stirrup, enabling him to embark onto power. As Minister for Justice, he later changed the constitution so that an inconsequential Premiership

would come to be. The president himself has forgotten all that. That is why he lives and acts as a contamination, a parasite: “le ver [...] dans le fruit” (Vol. 2, 115). By designating him as a mere proconsul of France in Senegal, Sembene reduces the president to a mere referent of memory, a literally sign, and a figment of others’ imagination.

1.2 *Camp de Thiaroye*

In his film *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), Sembene uses his own testimony as a Second World War veteran to thread together art, memory and history within the realms of (post)colonialism, panafricanist culture and nationalism. The autobiographical background of the film is heightened when one considers two factors. The first one is that Sembene remembers a time when he was a French citizen by birthright, which he did not give up until 1960, the year Senegal became independent (Gadjigo 76). Therefore, even though he derides Africans who clung to false assimilation (such as Mignane in *Le Dernier de l’Empire*), Sembene’s works contain the imprints of an era during which he too used to believe in France, a nation that he served just as faithfully as any other citizen. The second factor is tied to the first one in the sense that the Second World War emerges as a cornerstone of Sembene’s formative memory. Comparing his first-hand experience as a soldier with his short stay in school, Sembene insists that: “School did not teach me anything. I owe everything to the war” (Gadjigo 68). Having served as a mechanic-driver for one year and a half, Sembene came out of the war with enough memories to be a witness-artist, one who would later exclaim: “They shed their blood for France and the French did not hesitate to kill them” (ibid.).¹⁷ Indeed, if “memory [is] the womb of

¹⁷ The pronoun *they* refers to the tirailleurs whose tragic massacre is represented in *Camp de Thiaroye*. *Tirailleurs* (or *tirailleurs sénégalais*) refers to African infantrymen who were enlisted by France to fight during the two world wars. The appellation *tirailleurs sénégalais* is a misnomer because the soldiers were drawn from many countries in West and Central Africa.

history” (Ricoeur 87), then *Camp de Thiaroye* can be viewed as the forceful act of resuscitating a deliberately forgotten event within the violent history of colonialism.

Camp de Thiaroye reconstructs the infamous massacre of thirty-five repatriated African infantrymen during the night of 1st December 1944 in Thiaroye near Dakar. The plot of the film is straightforward in this regard. The story begins sometime in November 1944 when a ship docks in the port of Dakar, bringing hundreds of tirailleurs who have been fighting in Europe for four years. The tirailleurs are led by a Senegalese officer with strong intellectual inclinations, Sgt. Aloise Diatta (Ibrahima Sane), whose direct senior is Capt. Raymond (Jean-Daniel Simon). Waiting for them at the port are French generals who never participated in the war and whose racist discourse is voiced most frequently by Capt. George Labrousse. Immediately after their arrival, the tirailleurs march to what the colonial authorities term as a “*camp de transit*,” but it soon turns out that this is nothing short of a prison in which the colonial authorities envisage a de-education program for the war-tested and no-nonsense tirailleurs who, in their own words, “have seen too many corpses” in Europe. Right from the first day in the camp, the tirailleurs are quick to fight what they perceive to be well-calculated methods of dehumanising them, such as being served with rotten and inadequate food. Although they win the first round with the help of Capt. Raymond who advocates for an improvement of their diet, the tirailleurs ultimately loose the last battle which is determined not by right but by might and guile. Protesting against outright theft of their hard-earned money by the colonialists, the tirailleurs kidnap a French general whom they release only when he promises that they would get all their dues at the right rate of exchange. But, as soon as he is released, the general returns to Dakar from where he orders the craven Lieutenant Pierre to vacate the camp with his guards, leaving the tirailleurs on their own.

During that same night of the 1st December 1944, tanks surround the camp, which they destroy completely, killing thirty-five tirailleurs and wounding many others.

Camp de Thiaroye is a disturbing representation of history in which personal memories bear the traces of traumatic repetition. It is indeed surprising that Sembene was able to shoot such a controversial film in Africa during the 1980s, a period of dictatorships that hounded authors, burned books and outlawed artists. In this regard, I would like to point out that, as opposed to many other African countries, Senegal enjoyed a long history of artistic tolerance – with the notable exception of the censoring of *Ceddo* by President Léopold Sédar Senghor.¹⁸ In *Camp de Thiaroye*, Sembene takes advantage of this relatively lenient environment, and a remarkable degree of financial independence, to recount an event that had been deliberately hushed by Senegalese authorities who did not want to revive the atrocities committed by France during the colonial period. Sembene opted for a Senegalese-Tunisian-Algerian co-production which also speaks volumes about his pan-Africanist commitments. This co-production also serves as a subtle counterpoint to the kind of econo-political dependence that is satirized in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*.

Apart from the symbolic value of this unique production trajectory, *Camp de Thiaroye* makes some interesting historical parallels; as Gadjigo observes in his biography, the massacre is “strongly reminiscent, image after image, of the Sétif repression” (121). Just like the massacre depicted in *Camp de Thiaroye*, the Sétif bloodbath proves Aimé Césaire right: the only reason why Nazism shocked the world is that it subjected the Europeans to the treatment they had always reserved for other races:

¹⁸ Senghor justified the banning of *Ceddo* by arguing that the word should be spelt with a single “d”, to which Sembene responded by pointing out that the president neither spoke Wolof nor participated in its codification.

Ce nazisme-là, on l’a supporté avant de le subir, on l’a absous, on a fermé l’œil là-dessous, on l’a légitimé, parce que, jusque là, il ne s’était appliqué qu’à des [...] non-européens” (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, 12)

The Sétif carnage was set in motion by France’s knee-jerk response to peaceful demonstrations that took place in Algeria on May 8 1945, the very day when Germany officially surrendered, putting the Third Reich to an end. Algerian political parties such as the AML (Association des Amis du Manifeste et de la liberté) had chosen May 8 because of its liberating resonances: they “wanted to make an explicit link between the victory over fascism and the end of colonialism” (Evans and Phillips 51). To the demonstrators’ mottos such as “Long live a free Algeria” and “Down with colonialism,” the colonial authorities unleashed violence, and the Algerians responded by fighting back. In turn, this gave the French the justification they needed to carry out a butchery that lasted for weeks. The number of Algerians who were killed in Sétif has never been accurately recorded; the French admitted that just over 1, 000 people had died while Algerian nationalists such as the *Parti du peuple algérien* insisted that as many as 45, 000 had been killed (ibid. 52). The philosophical interpretations of the event are particularly revealing: “for the French government Sétif demonstrated the authority of the French nation state determined to wipe away the stain of defeat and occupation” (ibid. 52). Interestingly, the repatriated soldiers in *Camp de Thiaroye* not only make explicit associations between fascism and colonialism; they have brought home memories of a humiliated and occupied France. Therefore, their annihilation is an act of erasure, the “wiping away” of the stain of France’s defeat.

Camp de Thiaroye is Sembene's artistic effort to refill the gap left by this erasure. It is also an aggressive attempt to revive the urgent debate surrounding fascism, the occupation, and the presence of France in West Africa after the Second World War. It appears that, from the film's point of view, no moral or philosophical difference exists between colonialism and fascism; in fact, in the film, any tyrannical act is regarded as fascist in nature, and colonialists simply emerge as Nazis in another name. Due to this, Shaka Okiremuete has studied the film as the "disputation of the view that French colonial atrocities in Africa were exclusively products of the Vichy regime" (*Vichy Dakar and the Other Story of French Colonial Stewardship* 77). Okiremuete limits his study to a discussion of the film's representation of Vichy collaborators and those who fought against the Germans, an approach which is inspired, in part, by Sembene's anti-Gaullist leanings.¹⁹ I propose a wider reading that encompasses the pair presence/absence, which is the hallmark of memory in Sembenian texts. An interesting contrast presents itself right from the beginning: if *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is the drama of lack and absence, *Camp de Thiaroye* emerges as a powerful presence that insists on its own right to survival.

As a successful attempt at historiographical innovation, the film contains important indices that demonstrate its artistic subjectivity even as it draws inspiration from a real historical event. In this regard, the sequence against which the credits are listed is particularly revealing: in order to designate the ship that brings the tirailleurs as a vessel of displacement rather than reinstatement, the camera subjects it to shifting angles of view – eyeing it, as it were, as a suspicious object. Thus, in the opening shot, the ship is located to the extreme left of the viewer, and only a very small portion of its deck is shown. Particularly revealing is the fact that the first

¹⁹ In an interview with Nouredin Ghali, Sembene rejected reductionist comparisons which pit Pétain from De Gaulle: "The story of the soldiers killed in Senegal is De Gaulle; the story of Algeria in 1945 is De Gaulle; the story of Madagascar is De Gaulle..." See "An Interview with Ousmane Sembene." in *Film and Politics in the Third World*. Ed. John D.H. Downing. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1987. 41-54.

person to be captured on the deck is a wounded tirailleur on a stretcher. To the right of the screen, directly opposite the alighting tirailleurs, the viewer can see a detachment of the “local tirailleurs,” meaning those who did not go to fight in Europe and whose role will be to police the camp of Thiaroye. Sembene uses costumes to distinguish the two groups: while the local tirailleurs are clad in khaki shorts and red chechias (which are demeaning and infantilizing), the disembarking tirailleurs are dressed in elegant army uniforms that will soon be a born of contention. Moving from this atmosphere of military fanfare, we cut to a wider low-angle shot of the deck showing more wounded tirailleurs winding their way downstairs, their families waving. As the credits fill the screen, a long deep focus shot plays in the background, revealing Captain Raymond with his men, but this is quickly interrupted by European families celebrating: “Vive la France! Vive la victoire! Vive De Gaulle!” The spatial economy of the scene makes it clear that the tirailleurs will have to deal with a dichotomized country in which all Africans are treated with contempt. The Manichean assumptions of colonialism are brought to the fore when three European officials are separated both physically and morally from the returning African soldiers; Captain Labrousse’s observation that the infantrymen are “too well dressed” emphasizes this fact. This is precisely because to the colonialist, even by accoutrements, Africans must be marked in a manner that circumscribes their existence within the locus of subjugation. Moreover, the camera suggests that the Europeans are not cheering the tirailleurs; rather, a very long point of view shot of the full ship identifies it as a sign of France, the *patrie* whose redemption is cast against the wounded African soldiers. The paradigmatic make-up of the film is therefore clear: the viewer has to be aware of “what will not be shown” as an index of “what happens behind the scenes.” This explains why, during the massacre of the tirailleurs, the director finds no need to show those who are manning the tanks, choosing instead to subtly

suggest that it could be Africans, Europeans or both: it does not matter since the position of the tirailleur was ambivalent in the colonial economy. As the film clearly shows from the beginning, there were tirailleurs who were employed to police other tirailleurs. This is the point that Kenneth Harrow misses in his article *Camp de Thiaroye: "Who's That Hiding in Those Tanks, and How come We Can't See Their Faces."* (Iris, Spring 1995, 18: 147-52). Harrow confuses the Manicheanism of the colonial system with what he perceives to be Sembene's "binarism": the critic's assumption is that the film is built around racial polarities even though it is quite clear that there are very many gray areas – such as Diatta's marriage to a French woman, Raymond's sympathies for the African tirailleurs and the constant tension between the two factions of the tirailleurs.

The tirailleurs' wounds are captured with an insistence that leaves no doubt as to their trauma – that is, the camera reveals that the wounds we can see are minor compared to those that we cannot see. In *Camp de Thiaroye*, the presence of the "double wound" as a code in its own right cannot be gainsaid; indeed, wounding tends to be repeated, reverberated and echoed from the first shot to the very last one. At any rate, the ship that docks in the port of Dakar at the beginning of the film will depart only when the tirailleurs have been killed. But it will be carrying yet another batch of tirailleurs, and it is not difficult to imagine the ordeal they too will undergo once they arrive in Europe. Therefore, the denouement echoes the beginning, just as the opening shot hints at the tragic ending.

This repetition of the wound as a motif calls to mind the origins of the word trauma – which, in Greek, refers to an injury inflicted on a body (Caruth 1996 3). The paradigm of the wounded body bears with it a more important element – namely that, in the entire film, those who are traumatized are unaware of their traumas and that is why they undergo the same over

and over. In fact, they act in a manner that exposes them to more “wounding” even when the viewer can see pretty well that this does not have to be the case. The incomprehensibility of the trauma (and therefore its redundancy) rests precisely in this disconnect between a third party (in this case, the viewer) and the *tirailleurs*. Right from the first sequence, the camera tends to isolate the *tirailleurs* because nobody can understand them. To take the argument further, the camera seems to suggest that the *tirailleurs* will be killed because they acted as cannon fodder in the Second World War, that is, *because they almost died* in battle fronts in Europe. This *dedoublement* is indeed troubling, and that is why the overall effect of *Camp de Thiaroye* on the viewer is total frustration and a feeling of helplessness – it is as if nothing can be done to avert the tragedy the film sets out to recount. This tendency to repeat is particularly important in the economy of the film: it explains the complexity of central characters such as Pays and Diatta. It can be said that Sembene is telling the story of trauma as well as the traumatized. In the film, every trauma has a double that larks like an unknown shadow, and it is this silhouette that propels the victims to revert to danger because they have been there before.

Freud describes a similar phenomenon in *Beyond the Pleasure Principal* where trauma defines itself through perpetual recurrence and redundancy. Freud conceived trauma in poetic terms, a fact which could explain the linguistic handicaps that are associated with traumatized individuals (this makes *Thiaroye*’s Pays an iconic figure). To illustrate his argument, Freud cites the case of a woman who marries three successive husbands, and she has to nurse each one of them in more or less the same way on their deathbeds. Freud does not dwell on this particular woman; instead, he immediately relates her experience to the fate of the protagonist of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again (*Beyond the Pleasure Principal* 16).

Reading Tancred's pathos in relation to the context of *Camp de Thiaroye*, I find some important parallels. First, Tancred's lover has chosen (for no apparent reason) to dress as his enemy. Secondly, he strolls into the very forest where Clorinda's soul has fled, and, as if that is not enough, he slashes at *that particular tree* and not any other. In her analysis of Freud's essay in *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth observes that "the trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing actions of the survivor and against his very will" (3). In Sembene's literary and cinematic productions, such a compulsion to repeat is always associated with war veterans who always find themselves in danger after surviving a vicious battle. In *Camp de Thiaroye*, it is clear that while the war veteran is mentally disturbed due to the duress of the battle field, his killers act deliberately in order to deny him not only financial compensation but also the dignity that he deserves. That is why the "*camp de transit*" is built in a shady, isolated location; its occupants have been used and so they can be dispensed with in an inferno that leaves no evidence behind.

Before returning to trauma as a motif within the wider trope of the remembered (and/or the forgotten) in *Camp de Thiaroye*, I would like to trace the origins of the term "tirailleur"

which dominates the film. In *Colonial Conscripts* (1991), Myron Echenberg outlines the historical trajectory of *les tirailleurs sénégalais*. Louis Faidherbe enlisted the first detachment of 500 men in 1857 for the purposes of his expansionist campaigns in West Africa. By the outbreak of the First World War, successive French administrations had increased the number to almost 18,000 (7). The motivations behind the formation and maintenance of the detachment were always political, but the two World Wars brought in new philosophical problems into the equation: while all European powers had always used African soldiers to do some dirty work for them in the colonies, only France saw it fit to engage non-whites in what was perceived exclusively as a “white men’s war.” The creation of a permanent “Black Army” was advocated for by Charles Mangin, an officer who was born in Metz, Lorraine, in 1866. Mangin’s entry into the army was partly motivated by a morbid desire to avenge the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the Germans, which forced his own parents to exile (Ibid. 28). His proposal for the creation of a Black Army could be logically explained by insufficient numbers in the French army, but he found it necessary to add a clinical rationale to the enterprise: Africans were born to do hard physical work, and they “were possessed of a nervous system sufficiently less developed than that of whites so as to make them far less sensitive to pain” (Ibid. 29). While this comes as no surprise to anyone who understands colonial mentalities, the methods used to recruit the Africans are far more appalling. The Conscription Law, instituted by Governor Amédée William Merlaud-Ponty in 1912, paved the way for a more disastrous one which was passed in 1919, forcing a military obligation for all men in French West Africa. This would become a carte-blanche for the militarization of West Africans, leading to depopulation and total economic ruin among the communities, a fact which is revived in the film *Emitai*.

Thus, the trauma that permeates the existence of the tirailleurs in *Camp de Thiaroye* can be traced to their dislocation, which starts at the moment of conscription. *Emitai* dramatizes the enlistment of the tirailleurs, which could take the form of an ambush during the day or an abrupt attack in the dead of night, where entire communities were ravaged as unwilling men were matched away, leaving women and children behind. The French also resorted to deceit to attract some unsuspecting recruits. This included, but was not limited to, false promises of a good salary, great working conditions and a glorious repatriation (that is why, in *Camp de Thiaroye*, Capt. Raymond cautions that the tirailleurs have been lied to over and over again, to France's moral discredit). One of the most duplicitous tools that the colonial authorities launched just before the Second World War was a fortnightly comic strip, *Mamadou s'en va-t-en guerre*.²⁰ The cartoon romanticized the tirailleurs' military service, emphasizing that Mamadou ("le fils d'un vieux tirailleur") *willingly* joins the war in order to fight an aggressive Nazi Germany that has attacked France. This is one of the textual instances which problematize Albert Memmi's pair of colonialist/colonized: a European war forcefully weakens the border between the two entities, destabilizing perceived hierarchies. For that reason, Echenberg aptly observes that the tirailleurs serve as "a mirror of colonialism and a reflection of its most basic contradictions" (Ibid. 3).

The dislocation suffered by the tirailleurs during the war disabuses all benign pretensions in *Mamadou s'en va-t-en guerre*; even the more elitist newspaper, *La Gazette du Tirailleur* never hinted at the butchery that awaited the recruits.²¹ Apart from lampooning Hitler as an unthinking war-mongering lunatic and the Germans as unwilling and unprepared subjects, the two publications carefully avoided mentioning what African First World War veterans had gone through - underpayment, a poor diet and racist representations in the European media.

²⁰ The first episode of the comic strip came out in 1939. See Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts* pp 89-92.

²¹ The newspaper was published in Dakar between January 1 and June 1 1940. It appeared twice every month, targeting the more educated West Africans.

Throughout 1914-1918, metropolitan newspapers had depicted African soldiers as irrational alien giants who happily chopped their enemies to smithereens just for the fun of it. The German press took the Otherization process further and demonized the tirailleurs completely: alas, the black giants not only pursued white men relentlessly, they were actually motivated by a penchant for human flesh. Coupled with generalized fears of miscegenation, Europeans from both sides of the war regarded the tirailleurs with varying degrees of disdain. At the end of the First World War, the tirailleurs had left behind a contented France that wanted to forget Africans' contribution and a humiliated Germany that eventually fell into the hands of a xenophobic maniac. Thanks to Charles Mangin's myth of the sub-human tirailleur who fights for the sake of fighting and who never retreats, the Germans were particularly bent on pursuing African prisoners of war as a special target during the Second World War. Mangin's mythical image of a barbarian, ruthless machine only fanned German officers' fear: the Africans were said to mutilate the German wounded "in bestial fashion" (Echenberg 94), and therefore "towards these native (sic) soldiers, all kindness would be an error" (Ibid.).

The creation of "amalgamated" regiments on the French side of the Second World War has been described as a dramatic social experiment: "Roughly half the African regiments were broken up, down to company level, and merged with French ones" (Echenberg 91). This attempt at "assimilation" of the African soldiers can be explained mainly by the exigencies of the war. Yet, a lot can be said about France's attitude towards her African soldiers; the official appellation of the composite regiments was *Régiments d'Infanterie Coloniale Mixtes Sénégalais* (RICMS). Thus, the tirailleurs were regarded through the prism of colonial subjugation; the presence of the term "*coloniale*" betrays polarities of a European Self and a perceived Other, which problematizes the whole process of an "integrated" war effort. This contradicts *Mamadou s'en*

va-t-en guerre, where the African recruit responds to the needs of his country – that is, Mamadou acts as any patriotic French citizen. The tirailleurs’ tragedy was intensified further by memories that obsessed the Germans: in 1918, the French had deployed African soldiers in the occupation of Rhineland. The German press had responded to this by dwelling on what they named *die schwarze Schande* (the black shame); to them, France had deliberately chosen an inferior race to humiliate a defeated Germany. Hitler was particularly bent on repeating the *Schande* lest the German people forget. During the Second World War, the French generals warned the tirailleurs that the Germans would be particularly harsh to black people should they ever fall in their hands. At the same time, the Germans themselves targeted regiments which had Africans because the former had the reputation of being tenacious and hard fighters. Thus, for fear of being captured, the tirailleurs outperformed their employers’ expectations while the Germans pursued them relentlessly because of ideological and strategic reasons. Even so, neither the Africans nor the French were prepared for the efficiency and superiority of German weaponry. When Panzers were unleashed on the regiments, the French fled while more and more Africans were sent where they were likely to be hit again. Additionally, true to the tirailleurs’ fears, torture and summary execution of African POWs became the norm throughout the war.

Those tirailleurs who survived all these horrors had more waiting for them. The most shocking of these was what was referred to as “*le blanchissement*,” the “whitening” of the French military which Charles de Gaulle ordered at the end of the war. The process simply required all black soldiers to be brusquely withdrawn from the army so that young French soldiers could “be given a taste of victory” (Echenberg 99). During the war, it was the tirailleurs who had been placed in the frontlines. When the war ended, they were no longer fit to be seen in the same positions; they were replaced by men who had not even participated in the war.

Another stupefying development was a racially determined differentiation of the veterans: “Unlike the French soldiers, who were quickly issued back pay and were discharged, the Africans languished in camps” (Ibid. 98).

For the reasons outlined above, the silent historical subtext of *Camp de Thiaroye* can be traced to politically-motivated betrayal by Charles de Gaulle’s administration. As they awaited transportation back home, the tirailleurs had reasons to harbor bitter memories about an “ally” who made many promises and kept none of them. It can thus be argued that *Camp de Thiaroye* is a re-opening of the tirailleurs’ wounds – which should explain the presence of damaged bodies, mangled appendages, rolls of bandages, stretchers and crutches right from the first shot. Indeed, the film behaves very much like the voice that Freud invokes – that is, it is the voicing of a *repeated* injury, which makes it the voice of trauma. Interestingly, as Freud points out, traumatized individuals do not occupy their waking lives with memories of their “accidents”; on the contrary, “they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 7). This desire is, by definition, an attempt to forget.

In *Camp de Thiaroye*, the tirailleurs exhibit this desire to forget in many ways. For instance, against the backdrop of post-traumatic experiences, Ubangui emerges as a cantankerous, hot-tempered and loud lout. He and Congo search for normalcy in banal activities such as riding a bicycle while Niger establishes a workshop in the camp, mending his colleagues’ ragged outfits. Niger’s sewing machine signifies a soldier’s longing for civilian life, but its presence also gives insights into the intricate relationship between the tirailleurs’ memories and the coded language through which they express their hidden anguish: they have coined the term “*cadavré*” to designate anything that is ruined, so that “*une chemise cadavrée*” is a sorry sight indeed. Niger’s Singer sewing machine also reveals the tirailleurs’ search for economic freedom

and also their desire to bridge gaps between Europe and their own continent, but the film reveals that this would be the last thing for which the colonizer would wish. That is why Niger's optimism is often countered by small but significant accidents – such as Ubangui's misadventure that takes place immediately he leaves Niger's workshop, during which he narrowly escapes death as a truck hits his bicycle.

Even though the Camp of Thiaroye itself resembles a Nazi concentration camp, the tirailleurs transform it to a lively cultural center, complete with heated debates, prayer sessions, a lot of camaraderie, games and dance. Ironically, it is only the mute Pays who refuses to forget the similarities between what he has experienced in Europe and what he finds at home. When he arrives in the camp, his first reaction is to stare at the barbed wire and the manned watch tower, a sight which automatically transfers him back to Buchenwald where he was held as a POW. The trademark of his memories is an SS helmet which he guards with jealousy, and a very sad tune accompanies his sharp cognizance as he visualizes Europe during the occupation. His memory brings back the image of an African soldier hanging from barbed wire in Europe, a German soldier guarding a concentration camp and the sounds of machine-gun fire, all of which run on the screen very quickly. What the camera seems to be suggesting is that, now that the tirailleurs have freed France, the colonizer will do everything possible to forget their services, and this includes adopting Nazi tactics to deal with their demands and wipe away their memories. In this fragile environment where memories are viewed as a danger, none of the tirailleurs is as perceptive as Pays, who remains vigilant up to the last minute. He is the only one who actively rakes his mind in order to dig out memories that fill him with tears and rage, and for that reason the camera gives him remarkable narrative privileges: the spectator relies on Pays to see what all the other tirailleurs are concealing. Yet, Pays fails to communicate his forebodings not only

because of his language handicap but also because his colleagues are too busy engaging their bodies and minds in order to forget.

The dismal conditions in which the tirailleurs are kept serve to highlight two points. First, the image of the colonized (as conceptualized by the colonizer) is destabilized, interrogated and falsified. This is because, if such an entity would be the silent interlocutor of the colonialist's discourse, the tirailleurs prove to be subversive, intractable and rebellious. Secondly, the polarity that forms the backbone of the colonial system becomes unstable and unsustainable. Actually, *Camp de Thiaroye* shows that colonialism is not just a question of "Black against White"; rather, it is a discursive construct – which implies that the film is a work of deconstruction. The dialogues in the film illustrate this over and over again. For example, when Captain Raymond arrives in the camp for the first time, he expresses his displeasure with the facility, stating that the French owe the tirailleurs a lot and therefore they should not keep them in the camp for long. When Labrousse retorts that "it is better than their villages anyway," the expression "*leurs villages*" is loaded with meaning: in the colonial context, those who live in "*des villages*" are "*des autochtones*." Worse still, their societies are designated as "*des tribus*" which makes them very malleable in the mind of the colonizer so that, at a given moment, they can be the Rousseauist noble savage, only to be transformed into fire-spitting barbarians, all at the whim of the colonizer.

It can therefore be argued that the tirailleurs' rebelliousness is only the ineluctable reaction to an untenable economic system that thrives on an irrational discourse. In the film, the repatriated infantrymen refuse to be the Europeans' inferior Other who would acquiesce to appellations such as Capt. Labrousse's "*mes Noirs*." Actually, Labrousse's enunciation "*je connais mes Noirs*" is a lop-sided illustration of the Foucauldian relationship between knowledge

and power. Labrousse's claim "to know" is immediately followed by a possessive precisely because colonialism is reductivist in nature, and it must constantly produce a certain type of knowledge to justify itself. As a means of expression and representation, colonial discourse must create an Other who is "known" well enough to be totalized.²² The *tirailleurs* quickly realize that they have been inscribed in the domain of sameness the better to highlight their usability – hence the hasty desire to force them to wear infantilizing attire and the refusal to pay them their dues. In such a situation, the options are very limited: either, the colonizer gives in to the demands of the colonized (in which case his privileges are threatened), or he refuses, triggering a war. In either case, the colonized is destroyed, rendering the colonizer a useless entity (because, as Memmi's schema shows, there can be no colonizer without the colonized). For this reason, *Camp de Thiaroye* is an anti-colonial text through and through.

If the colonized is nothing but a discursive construct emanating from the colonial knowledge system (*I know them therefore I have power over them*), then that system is ill-prepared to deal with Sgr. Diatta and his men. To the claim that "*mes Noirs*" are big children who can obey any order, the *tirailleurs* react by being totally disobedient. First, they refuse to eat the bad food presented to them: "*nous ne sommes pas de cochons.*" They even go to the extent of giving the stinking portions to Labrousse himself, who pushes them away with distaste. But even when Raymond has successfully advocated for an improvement of the soldiers' diet, they still go to the surrounding towns where they obtain food for themselves. In one of the most powerful sequences in the film, the *tirailleurs* bring live chickens and a ram into the camp. Their cultural sensibilities are brought to the fore when they all appoint a marabou to kill the animal so that it can be *halal* – thereby making it fit for the consumption of Muslims, Christians and non-

²² I use the term "totalizing" in its Levinsian sense – that is, a violent denial of the other's difference and autonomy. This totalization serves as the beginning point of what Aimé Césaire would later call "thingification" in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*.

believers alike. This democratization of a harsh living space achieves its nadir in the scenes where the Muslims pray facing Mecca while their non-Muslim colleagues are busy playing cards or exchanging insults. These activities not only reveal the *tirailleurs*' zest for life, they also underline a culturally-rich population of men who have been drawn from very diverse origins within the same continent. It is for this reason that they use national nomenclatures to identify themselves: Niger, Ubangui, Congo, Benin, Guinée, Gabon and the most enigmatic of all, Pays. This transnational and transcultural environment problematizes the colonizer's simplistic and monolithic conceptualization of Africa.

The *tirailleurs*' agency is to be found in their counter-discourse whose mainstay is memory/forgetting. In this regard, Pays is an icon not only because he is the sum total of "*des pays*" but also because he emerges as a sign of memory itself. His pathos lies in the fact that he is the witness who cannot tell what he has seen because he has lost the ability to speak. Actually, Pays's linguistic handicap is a powerful trope in the sense that his memories traumatize him, and in return trauma blocks his speech. If, as Thomas Vogler (2003) observes: "telling the story of survival [is] a form of self-therapy" (41), then Pays becomes a troubling pillar of *Camp de Thiaroye*, a film in which memories beg for a vent. Pays has lost the channel through which he would recount his story, and his colleagues have opted not to pay much attention to his noise. In pure narrative terms, Pays is a double tragedy because, since he cannot tell his story of survival, death would erase him completely, leaving no trace of his experience. In a way, by killing the mute Pays (*the unspeaking peoples/countries*), the colonizer would achieve his goal because the witness-victim would die with his story.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth propounds traumatic experience as “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (7).²³ That is, the survivor of an unbearable event still finds survival itself to be unbearable. Furthermore, these two “are both incompatible and absolutely inextricable” (ibid.). Pays is trapped between the “luck” of escaping from a German Nazi camp and the painful memories that his survival entails even as he finds himself in another form of imprisonment, this time in his own country. That is why he is the personification of trauma. His SS helmet, which he carries everywhere as though it were a trademark, is in real sense a referent for the unknowable. For the viewer will never know what exactly transpired while Pays was in Europe. The helmet is a physical and mobile sign of memory. Yet it is precisely this memory that Pays’s psyche tries to protect him from in order to continue surviving. Trauma and memory therefore feed one another, become redundant and eventually destroy that which they set off to protect. Pays’s SS helmet cannot be separated from him any more than anyone can be separated from a vital organ: he fights anyone who tries to take it from him even at the risk of being shot dead. But the same helmet cries loudly: it signifies too much memory, the type of memory that will not allow Pays to speak and hence be healed. The SS helmet reinforces Pays’s trauma in yet another way: being an object of death, it must always be at hand. In other words, the victim of trauma must constantly re-live his encounter with death even as he tries to survive. Trauma is indeed “an enigma of survival” (Caruth 58). In a way, the SS helmet speaks of writing – Pays’s story of survival is inscribed on that helmet just as the story of the tirailleurs will be inscribed into the history of Senegal. But, for the former to happen, Sembene must first resurrect Pays, the survivor-victim who could not redeem himself even though he saw and recognized tankers for what they were in the dead of the night.

²³ Caruth’s emphasis.

The moral gap between the tirailleurs and the French officers emanates from the type(s) of knowledge from which the two groups are drawing. Like De Jean in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), the French generals in *Camp de Thiaroye* believe in the myth of “the known” African who has been dissected to the bone, an entity that has been categorized and mummified in the image of *Mamadou s’en va-t-en guerre*. As a perfect *autochtone*, Mamadou’s main quality is an unsurprising lack of depth or originality, and that is why very little effort is needed to transport him to Europe where he will act as canon fodder in a war that does not concern him or his own country. In fact, Mamadou confuses France for his own *patrie*. Contrary to this image, *Camp de Thiaroye* reveals the existence of a more complex African who is anything but the so-called *autochtone*. Like Ibrahima Bakayoko of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Sgt. Diatta is a voracious intellectual (and a student of law) who has an extensive library that includes old authors such as Marcus Garvey as well as contemporary texts like Vercors’ *Le Silence de la mer*.²⁴ Diatta irks Capt. Labrousse because he listens to classical music and not some “*tomtoms indigènes*”, which locates him outside the ethos of the colonial system. None of the French officers have read Vercors’ text, and the fact that Diatta reads such books will later be used to prove that he is a communist. Thus, Lieutenant Pierre speaks on behalf of collective ignorance when he claims that Vercors is a Bolshevik. When it becomes apparent that the tirailleurs can no longer be contained in the camp in its current conditions, Capt. Raymond tries to disabuse the French officers: “The time for your *petits-negres* is over forever [...]. These men have witnessed fighting between whites for five years.” In other words, Raymond is aware of the fact that while

²⁴ Since *Le Silence de la mer* was written during the Nazi Occupation, the intertextual overtones between it and *Camp de Thiaroye* are astounding. The fact that the most refined French officer (Raymond) has not read *Le Silence* is a direct attack on the “la mission civilisatrice”: the blind seem to be leading the sighted. Vercors’ novel was published in 1942, the same year when Diatta’s parents are killed by French authorities in Effok even as Diatta himself is busy fighting to save France from the Occupation. Jean-Pierre Melville used the same title in his 1949 cinematic adaptation of the novel. One narrative parallel between Sembene’s film and *Le Silence* is the power (and also helplessness) of muteness that forms the backbone of the two stories.

Labrousse and his colleagues rely on a myth that they have fabricated, the tirailleurs understand Nazism, Fascism and the story of the occupation first hand. The French officers have limited sources of knowledge and information; they over-rely on the radio to update themselves. Moreover, the fact that they did not participate in the war can only diminish their pride in the eyes of the tirailleurs. Diatta knows how to drive the point home: “Where were you in 1940?”

The intrigue of the film revolves around two incidents of kidnap, both of which reveal the tirailleurs’ sense of justice which borders on imprudence. In the first instance, Sgt. Diatta is attacked and hijacked by American soldiers, forcing the tirailleurs to react in a commensurate manner by taking an American hostage in exchange. The brawl between Diatta and the Americans is not an accidental one; it is the result of another conflict that takes place in the Coq Hardi. Actually, the pub’s name points towards internal strife and contestation among the inhabitants of the European continent.²⁵ When he first enters the bar, Diatta is mistaken for a Black American soldier due to his uniform: “Joe, what can I get you?” But the Sergeant decides to speak French, provoking immediate resentment: “Madame, il y a un Nègre ici!” To the French barmaid, a Black American would not be *Nègre*. Had Diatta spoken English, he would have passed for Joe (who always pays double because he is American).

Language therefore plays into racial politics. It appears that, if Diatta becomes a *Nègre* at a specific point – that is, when he utters “*un pernod*” - it is not merely a question of his skin-color. After all, had he pretended to be “Joe”, all indications are that he would have been well received, but the two sides of the allied forces have commercialized the war so much that even prices are determined by national origins. That is why, when Diatta enters Le *Coq hardi*, the beer

²⁵ Le Coq Hardi is the national emblem of the French community of Wallonia, Belgium. Sembene seems to be mocking the fragmented nature of European nations; even the smallest among them has sub-units that hardly co-exist. In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, he constantly refers to the two world wars as tribal warfare. This is a provocative way of forcing Europeans to analyze the language they use to describe other nations.

changes price: “Mathilde, doublez le prix; c’est un Américain.” The fact that Diatta speaks French localizes him within the realm of the colonized, separating him from the English-speaking Black Americans. This in itself is ironical given that desegregation had not yet taken place in the United States; the African-American soldier who bullied Diatta would have very few rights in his own country. This illustrates the contradictions of a race-based socio-economic system: an African-American is not *nègre*; he is Joe. But this color-sensitive conception of human subjects does not apply in two different places within the same colony. So, when Corporeal Diarra and four other tirailleurs kidnap an American soldier in exchange for Diatta, Lieutenant Pierre exclaims: “C’est un soldat américain *blanc*. Rélâchez-le!” The ensuing telephone conversation between Pierre and Labrousse is captured in shot-reverse shot, the better to heighten Pierre’s panic: “Un *Blanc*, oui!”

In contrast to Pierre’s conception, the tirailleurs’ understanding of situations is purely logical. When Gabon reports the details of Diatta’s attack to his colleagues, Ubangui’s response summarizes their rationale: “Quatre contre *un*, c’est fasciste!” The issue of color seems not to matter at all as far as the tirailleurs are concerned. To them, it is the prerogative of human subjects to act sincerely irrespective of their color or origin. The tirailleurs’ intervention is therefore motivated by a sense of social consciousness and fairness: if Diatta had been fighting with one man, they would not have involved themselves. But since four American soldiers attacked Diatta, four tirailleurs (not five or six) must do the same in order to maintain the fairness of the game. The trick works: after holding the American overnight, the tirailleurs negotiate for Diatta’s release, an event that brings the French officers face-to-face with their American counterparts. However, nothing indicates that the two allied forces have anything in common – least of all equality. The Americans enjoy a lot of impunity in the streets of Dakar, and as they

face the French in Thiaroye, they quite bluntly state that they do not need much provocation to destroy the camp. Diatta seems to be quite happy interpreting that statement. But when the American exclaims that the French have lost their empire, Diatta refuses to interpret. Thus, as a polyglot, Diatta has the power to transcend psychological boundaries. In a sense, he has the ability *to refuse* – which makes him the “*homme de refus*” who is celebrated in *Ceddo*.

It is clear, therefore, that the use of multiple languages in *Camp de Thiaroye* reinforces the tirailleurs’ contestation of the colonizer’s claim to knowing. While the French officers speak only one language, the tirailleurs speak several of them, so that they easily ostracize the officers if and when they desire. Diatta speaks perfect French, English and Diola. Corporal Diarra speaks French, English, German and Wolof. Actually, the tirailleurs have modified the French language, coming up with what the colonizers contemptuously term *le petit negre*. This pidgin French is a linguistic *bricolage*, a mélange that enables them to communicate in the same language even though they come from different nationalities. It is a language born out of necessity, in the battle-fields, and so it has all the qualities of a rather flexible lingua-franca whose main characteristic is disregard to rules of grammar. The spectator is introduced to the language in the lengthy tracking shot of the tirailleurs marching from the port to the camp, chanting:

Moi engagé militaire, moi engagé militaire

*Moi pas besoin galons, soutez-moi du riz*²⁶

The lyrics of this refrain reveal the circumstances in which the tirailleurs’ pidgin French developed: which soldier does not care for promotions (*galons*)? The tirailleurs can only be expressing a bitter fact about their service, which is explicitly brought out in novels such as Sembene’s *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ferdinand Oyono’s *Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille* (1956) and Emanuel Dongala’s *Le Feu des origines* (1987). In all of these texts, tirailleurs are enlisted

²⁶ The lyrics of the song come from the song *Ancien Combattant* (1984) by Kasimir Zoba, also known as Zao.

to fight for France, and if they die in the battle fields, all what their families can receive is a medal. The old man in Oyono's novel loses all his sons in Europe, and when the French authorities give him a medal as compensation, his wife protests that even a dog could not have accepted such pay for "ses gouttes de liquide" (meaning offspring). In *Les Bous de bois de Dieu*, Ibrahima Bakayoko confronts the governor, challenging him to take back his medals because, as memorializing devices, these objects are a mockery to the mother who has lost her sons in Europe. Therefore, in *Camp de Thiaroye*, Diatta and his men must be aware of the fact that their fallen colleagues will only get a medal (if anything), and that is why they express disdain for decorations: "*Moi pas besoin galons.*" They ask instead to be given adequate food: "*Soutez-moi du riz*" (the tirailleurs say "soutez" instead of "ajoutez").

As a linguistic register, the so-called *petit negre* is utilitarian in the sense that the tirailleurs have coined it for their own uses according to practical circumstances in the battle fields, but its presence in the film also reveals the partisan nature of the discourse it vehicles. This is in keeping with the warped, Manichean "realities" within which the colonial system operates. For one, the tirailleurs discourse is a factual ("quatre contre un, c'est fasciste!"). It also voices complaints against injustices. Thus, in the scene where the French officers ransack the tirailleurs' quarters, the latter are exposed to the sun, and the spectator can hear the mosquitos humming as they bite them. Ubangui's response to this treatment is: "pourquoi nous au soleil? Cela est fasciste!" This discourse counters the overly-opinionated language of the French officials, which tends to elide reality through generalization: "dans leurs villages, ils ne mangent que du riz et du millet." Sometimes, the discourse of the French officers reveals their own deficiencies, and their words counter their claims to knowledge: "tous les intellectuels sont des communistes." Thus, if the French officers regard the *petit-negre* as a "copy" of French, then the

copy ends up being so different from the “original” as to be unrecognizable. This gives the film its humor, aligning the spectator with the star-crossed tirailleurs. So, when Corporal Diarra takes the command of the troops, he calls out: “*Mis commandements!*” But it is the voluble Ubangui who creates many light moments when he resorts to insults: “*Toi con! Ta maman con!*”

As a geographical space that is designed for political purposes, the camp of Thiaroye proves to be an aborted attempt at deconstructing memories. Interestingly, it is Sergeant Diatta who sees the signboard that reads: “Le Camp des isolés coloniaux.” In French, the adjective “isolé” not only means isolated, but when accompanied by the indefinite article, it can be used to mean “prisoner” – and that is how Diatta understands the term as he walks into the camp. From the many angles and distances that it is captured, the camp appears to be completely secluded from any form of life other than the huge baobabs that only heighten its isolation: the spectator is “*au milieu de nulle part.*” The only way in which the tirailleurs would cope with this segregation is by walking outside the camp, and this too is curtailed by the colonial authorities soon after the incident between Diatta and the Americans. My interpretation of this prohibition stems from the very purpose of the camp itself: it is meant to be a site of erosion, of neutralizing memories and manipulating desires. This explains the deprofessionalization of the tirailleurs by stripping them of their garments. The scene in which the tirailleurs throw their army boots into a big heap is very revealing; the amassment of shoes is accompanied by a corresponding debasement of the men, as individuals and a collectivity of professionals. Shoes are meant to protect the feet and enhance walking. The walk is a human activity that is also associated with a claim to freedom. As V.Y Mudimbe (1994) observes, “Walking consists of specializing and extending an internal space, in keeping with internal convictions which the act makes possible” (135). Borrowing from Michel de Certeau, Mudimbe argues that the act of walking is associated with possessing: I

walk in *my* country, or in *our* town. If colonization, as defined by Mudimbe, is nothing but the “process of rearrangement of a foreign human space and its inhabitants” (146), then the absurdity of the whole exercise is revealed by the dynamics of the camp of Thiaroye where the “stronger party” is incapable of limiting the tirailleurs’ movements – hence their claims to personal liberty.

In two important shots, the director resorts to written references to warn the spectator about the looming disaster. The first reference appears in white letters against a black screen: “30 Novembre 1944, 10 heures”. In the sequence that follows this reference, the tirailleurs capture a French general who has refused to exchange their money at the right rate (he offers a half of the appropriate rate of exchange). Communication breaks down completely in the camp as Sergeant Diatta refuses to reason with his men on behalf of the French: “J’ai fini mon service il y a deux ans. On m’a retenu de force.” When the colonial officers ask Raymond to convince Diatta, the latter becomes adamant, declaring that since Morlaix, the French authorities have been lying to the tirailleurs. Negotiations fail completely when Diatta, facing his friend Raymond, declares that, just as the tirailleurs have been fighting against the enemies of France in Europe, they will now fight for Africa. It can be said that, in this instance, the tirailleur, who was actually a mercenary since the days of Faidherbe, has now metamorphosed to become a freedom fighter for his own country. The real danger that this new tirailleur poses to the empire is voiced by Diatta who further declares that a right is neither discussed nor negotiated. The discourse of the tirailleur has attained a philosophical and oratorial value, which makes it the voice of the learned politician.

Although the captured general is incapable of appreciating the full force of the new voice of the tirailleur turned into an orator-politician, he nonetheless recognizes that his life is in peril. In order to win his freedom, he lies to the tirailleurs that all their dues will be paid at the right

rate of exchange. To Pays' distress, his colleagues prove to be gullible in this crucial moment; they release the general, and they relax completely so that they even abandon the tower that they have been guarding. After a night of song and dance which only Pays refuses to join, the men retire, leaving their mute companion who sleeps on top of the tower. He is awoken by the sound of tanks that have surrounded the camp. His warnings are taken as the voice of an insane man, and Diatta orders the men to go back to sleep. The second written reference captures the response of the Empire to the tirailleurs rebellion. Once again, in white letters against a white background, the spectator is given the hour and the time during which the tanks open fire: "1^{er} Decembre 1944, 3 heures du matin." Amidst further references that read "Discipline et Valeur," the camp is destroyed. The sequence ends when Labrousse appears in front of the general and declares: "Vos orders ont été exécutés."

Camp de Thiaroye cultivates close ties between documentary, narrative and history. As an artistic desire to memorialize a historical tragedy, the film becomes architectural, so that it replaces the epitaphs that were missing since the day the tirailleurs were massacred.

CHAPTER 3

MEMORY TRANSFORMED INTO SPIRITUALITY AND PARRHESIA

In the last chapter, I showed how Sembene aestheticizes memory to recount history and vice-versa. By mediating memory through writing, he localizes and sees the past through the prism of the present. Moreover (as Gadjigo argues), since this author-director started writing fiction in order to overcome angst in exile, the question of identity erupts over and over in his work, always accompanied by the indissoluble dyad of memory/trauma. Such remembrance is geared towards healing in more or less the same way that psychoanalysis goes about it – that is, through narratives that often rely on confabulation in order to be complete.²⁷ Actually, since memories present themselves in the form of images, memory can be taken as an analogy for cinema, an art that was born out of photography. To make films based on memories is tantamount to saying that memory is basically *of* and *about* the past. That is why, in his attempt to recount trauma-imbedded histories, Sembene resurrects ghosts such as the ones that are celebrated in *Camp de Thiaroye*. The kind of art that springs out of such memories cannot appeal to everyone; because his art is agitated, it must alienate some people. That being the case, the historicity of the events represented in *Emitai* and *Camp de Thiaroye* cannot be gainsaid. Together with this evocation of the historical as a basis for the artistic, Sembene introduces a unique and radicalized form of spirituality into his fiction.

In *Sources of the Self* (1990), Charles Taylor argues that “we are selves only in that certain issues matter for us” (35). Taylor continues to insist that identity has to be worked out through a language of interpretation that the individual in question has come to accept as a valid

²⁷ That is, by filling in gaps in memory through elements that may or may not be factual.

articulation of those issues. Reflecting along similar lines, Casey Edward contends that “in remembering, we come back to the things that matter” (2000 xxii). Recognizing art as a repository of memory, Edward continues to observe that “to disclaim one’s memories is to annihilate them” (ibid. 2). That being the case, a denigration of memory translates to an assault on the Self. In the last chapter, I showed how Sembene represents such degeneration through the character of His Excellency Leon Mignane – a being without a memory and therefore a non-being. One of the issues that matter most to Sembene is truth, but it has to be mediated through memory and a certain type of discourse. That is why, to dominant characters such as Cheikh Tidiane Sall, writing is both an act of transmission of *memoires* and a harsh self-evaluation. If Tidiane’s conscience is tangled with continuous internal voices as well as external ones (such as that of *Djia Umrel Ba*), it is because the kind of truth that Sembene is interested in has to invite interruption and interrogation.

Therefore, in Sembene’s aesthetics, there is a remarkable overlap between personal/collective memory and truth. In fact, memory is conjoined with the conceptionalization of truth, both as a personal quest and an intellectual exercise. In his biography, Samba Gadjigo writes that as Sembene was growing up, he heard his father assert over and over that “there can’t be two truths at the same time” (25). While that may sound banal, it becomes particularly important to the reader who has to deal with ubiquitous tropes of veracity in Sembene’s work. However, it appears that, while the father may have been satisfied with the Islamic oneness of truth, culminating in the belief of a monotheistic deity who personalizes the concept of truth itself, Sembene the writer chooses to problematize the whole notion altogether.

I would like to explore two general but closely related issues that emanate from this aspect of Sembene’s art. The first one is rather philosophical, whereby some candid characters

interrogate the value of truth, pausing questions that introduce doubt and provoke controversial debate. This Socratic nature of Sembenian dialogues is particularly revealing; it comes out very strongly in *Vehi-Ciosane* (1966).

The second problem that I will be exploring is the relationship between truth and the temporal organization of the texts in question. It so happens that, in many of Sembene's literary and cinematic productions, reckonings of truth often supplant major personal or collective catastrophes. Consequently, the Janus-faced dyad of memory-trauma is always brought forth, invoking the quest of truth as an attempt at catharsis. That being the case, the discourse that is produced is inevitably violent and resolute. Yet, even if catharsis may be obtained, the answer to the original question is still ambiguous, resulting in an impossibility of closure. Actually, rather than lead to a single answer, the typical Sembenian text concentrates heavily on the nature of the discourse so that any perceived solution is subsumed in the discursive procedure itself. I propose, therefore, that looking for solutions to "real" life's problems in the denouement of such texts is to put the cart before the horse.

A good illustration of this is *Emitai* (1971), a film in which gods behave indifferently to their worshippers' anguish, forcing some of them to resort to deicide. That in itself does not solve the existential threat facing the Diola in the film; at any rate their fate has already been decided right at the beginning, and all the spectator can do is to wait for the moment when they will be decimated. What matters though is the fact that some individuals in the community interrogate the gods' passiveness and silence when the community needs them most. Added to this is the fact that, as far as the characters' memory reveals, it is not the first time that the gods have failed the devotees. In *Emitai*, the elders remember that the Diola were forcefully

mobilized to fight for France during the First World War, yet their gods do absolutely nothing to protect their young men from being displaced yet again for a second time.

Although radical spirituality is the bedrock of the three texts being analyzed here, some sharp differences do present themselves. In both *Vehi-Ciosane* and *Emitai*, there is little doubt that existential threats bear so hard on marginalized societies that they violently call forth traumatic memories in order to judge their belief (or lack of it). In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, a different kind of truth is sought using a more subtle form of spirituality. Nevertheless, all three texts have one thing in common: the truth is spoken only by *a certain type of a person* who stands out in stark opposition to the status quo. Therefore, what is at stake in these texts is not so much about what truths are spoken, but rather by whom and how they are told. Actually, truth-speaking emerges as a separate type of discourse – a distinct genre of verbal activity. Michel Foucault called this type of speech *parrhesia*²⁸ and the truth-teller the parrhesiastes (*Fearless Speech*, 7). By engaging in parrhesia (truth-telling), the parrhesiastes ends up antagonizing another party, thereby exposing the Self to danger. For Foucault, truth-telling can only be accomplished at a price.

To explain the concept of parrhesia, Foucault invokes Euripides's play *Ion* in which Apollo refuses to take responsibility for his actions through calculated silence and/or outright lies. There is an interesting similarity between the way the concept of truth/falsehood is brought up by both Euripides and Sembene. In *Ion*, Apollo is totally absent from the stage although he is right in the center of the whole drama. In fact, when the god sends Athena to meet Creusa and Ion towards the end of the play, the reader knows that Apollo is just trying to save face.

Athena's explanation of the situation also reads like a lie; all she wants to do is prove that the

²⁸ Foucault traces the term *parrhesia* to its pre-Socratic origins, showing its etymological evolution over the ages. In this dissertation, I will use the term to designate Foucault's final definition, which is fearless truth-telling in the face of danger.

gods are always just even though the reader knows otherwise. Ion himself at one point wondered why the gods punish mortals for being wicked while the former indulge in rape just because they can. In other words, to Ion, the status of being a god can be a door to impunity.

Ion is a play in which the steward of truth takes refuge in cover-ups that must be replaced by more cover-ups. I have shown how this takes place in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* where a Head of State disguises his guile through physical absence. In that particular case, what the ministers of Mignane treat as “un secret d’Etat” is actually no secret at all. Like Apollo, His Excellency is not the kind of a person who would remain unseen or unheard unless there was something to hide. Mignane disappears on Thursday night, and by Friday morning everyone is inquiring as to his whereabouts. “Secret” is therefore a problematic concept; the “secret” remains hidden only for a certain period of time during which silence and lies try to replace the truth. In other words, something is secret because someone knows and does not want to divulge, which therefore proves that it is no secret at all. In *Ion* and *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, the lie tries to denature the truth, but in the long run the secret becomes a truth deferred but not destroyed. In the case of Apollo as well as Mignane, the secret contains the seeds of its own destruction because people have a natural penchant for the kind of scandals that camouflage themselves as secrets. In Delphi, Apollo’s escapade in the cave had been whispered to Ion long before Creusa eventually shows up. Although Ion will not know that Apollo is his real father until Athena reveals it at the end of the play, he already knows that a certain woman was raped by the god – and that is why he castigates deities who indulge in sex with their devotees.

Apollo’s physical absence can be viewed as a form of loud silence aimed at concealing the truth in his own temple at Delphi, where he is supposed to be presiding over the truth. It so happens that, during one of his wanderings around Athens, Apollo had taken advantage of

Creusa's presence in a bush to satisfy his sexual desires. When Creusa consequently gives birth to a boy, she puts him in a basket, leaves him in a cave, and hopes that he will die of exposure. But Apollo sends Hermes to bring the boy to Delphi where he grows up as a temple attendant.²⁹ Meanwhile, Creusa marries a foreigner, Xuthus, but the couple cannot have a child. Although they journey to Delphi together, Creusa and Xuthus are not exactly on the same page. For one, Creusa has never revealed to her husband that she had a child prior to their marriage. She goes to Delphi in order to find out what happened to the son whom she begot after her encounter with Apollo. The confrontation between the princess and the god is inevitable. The god opts to flee from his temple, but, even in absentia, he is still able to engineer lie after lie. Creusa reacts to this duplicity by accusing the god publicly in his own temple. Foucault explains Creusa's outburst as an "emotional reaction to the god's injustice and lies" (52). In *Véhi Ciosane*, Ngoné seeks catharsis through similar ranting. However, Dèthyé Law's discourse is purely intellectual and Socratic.

In delineating the parameters to be used in order to test the validity of a parrhesian discourse, Foucault emphasizes certain moral qualities, the most important one being courage: "Someone is said to use parrhesia and merits consideration as a parrhesiastes only if there is a risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth" (17) For example, Creusa becomes a parrhesiastes by challenging Apollo, the god of truth. Creusa is a mere mortal, and Apollo is one of the most powerful deities in Greek theology. In the play, Ion observes that the gods respond to human sinfulness through brutality. A devotee proves allegiance to a deity through humility, and this requirement is nullified during Creusa's outburst. Actually, she quite blatantly

²⁹ Apart from being the messenger of the gods, Hermes was also the inventor of language and speech. Like the Wolof griots, Hermes occupies an ambiguous position in Greek literature: he not only inspires artists, he is also seen as a liar, a thief and a trickster. Apollo seems to be confident that he can keep the child and still lie about his origin and/or identity.

embarrasses the god. To Foucault, this would be particularly important because the princess expresses her personal relationship to truth and risks her life because she recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve society (19). Foucault insists that the parrhesiastes has to be *inferior* to the Other whom he or she is confronting. To make this clear, I compare Creusa's speech with Athena's; the former cannot be parresian. This is because Athena, being a goddess, risks nothing. At any rate, her appearance is motivated by damage-control. Again, because Apollo has told so many lies, and since Athena speaks on his behalf, the reader becomes skeptical to anything she says.

In *Véhi Ciosane*, the griot Dèthyé Law uses a radical discursive tone that agitates the status quo. His main pursuit is to seek the locus in which truth and belief coincide, a fact that is lost to both the aristocracy whose praises he is supposed to sing, and religious leaders who assume the role of educating the community. In *Emitai*, Djimeko defies both the high priesthood and the gods, reminds the deities of their failings, and sets off to chart a new path for the community by choosing death over silence. In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, Cheikh Tidiane Sall becomes a parrhesiastes because of his relationship to himself as well as the president through criticism. The journalist Kad operates in the margins of mainstream writing because he cannot compromise what he perceives as his duty to truth. Kad appears to care more about moral law than financial success. All these characters fit in Foucault's definition of the parrhesiastes.

2.1 Sembenian Parrhesiastes in *Véhi Ciosane*

In 1966, Sembène published two novellas, *Le mandat, précédé de Véhi Ciosane*. While *Le mandat* is widely studied, *Véhi Ciosane* has not received adequate attention from critics. This may be partly explained by the importance of the themes treated in *Le mandat*: unemployment,

corruption, and social degeneration. This novella captures Sembène's impatience regarding the ineptitude and avarice of the neo-colonial elite that he blames for many of the problems that plague the African continent. However, *Le mandat*'s popularity should not imply that *Véhi Ciosane* is any less important. If anything, a careful study of the latter reveals a more radical approach to the same concerns. *Véhi Ciosane*'s lack of popularity among teachers and critics can be explained by its elusive style and the controversial nature of the story's driving force — incest, which is, as Frederick Ivor Case put it, "too delicate a subject for most intellectuals" (8). In addition, while *Le mandat* is stylistically accessible, *Véhi Ciosane* is characterized by poetic preludes, digressions, and experimentation with language.

The structural organization of the novella is very unique. The paratext, which has four parts, tends to foreground the story's indeterminacy. It starts with a dedication which is followed by a poem. After that, the reader is confronted with a rather pontificating commentary which is in turn followed by an introduction. Of these, only the poem has a title: "SANS VIE." The story is dedicated to Saar Pathé who is identified as "l'un de mes compagnons de toute ma jeunesse" (11). This being the case, Sembene's personal memories have intruded into the story long before it starts. The author's presence in the poem is undisputable. The reader learns that Pathé died fighting for France in Indochina, so the poem can be seen as an epitaph. But, added to this tragic end of the African soldier, a new power wipes out his memories for good: "C'est l'Amérique phare du monde libre qui bombarde ta tombe vingt ans après" (12). This accusatory line is referring to the Vietnamese War. Yet Pathé is not an innocent victim; Sembene's dedicatee believed in a God called *Gain* who needs Money in order to grant happiness (11). Then, without warning, Sembene resorts to unabashed moralizing:

Il naît parfois dans les plus simples familles, des plus humbles communautés, un enfant qui, en grandissant, élève son nom, le nom de son père, de sa mère, de toute sa famille, de sa communauté [...] plus encore par ses travaux, il ennoblit l'HOMME (13).

This “great child” is immediately contrasted with another one who: “[...] par sa conduite, ténit tout l’héritage de son passé, blesse l’honnête HOMME de passage, élabousse même la dignité de l’individu *diambur-diambur*” (ibid.).³⁰ Sembene therefore shifts from his original memories of Pathé and plunges the reader into a sermon about strength of character. The analytical value of the dedication and the poem is to point directly at Sembene’s biography. Clearly, the author knew Pathé, whose fate he shares as one of Africa’s sons of a certain generation: “Pauvre Mère Afrique/Stérile tu aurais été un paradis/pour tes fils...” (ibid. 12). The introduction situates the author among the readers he is addressing, defining himself as one of them: “Pendant les années, je me suis entretenu avec quelques-uns de vous: AFRICAINS” ((16). The irruption of capitals in the paratext tends to highlight Sembene’s personal convictions, such as his antipathy towards negritude and Senghor’s ideology of *Africanité*. However, once the story begins, the author disappears, giving way to an omniscient narrator who is sometimes displaced by certain vocal characters.

The quintessence of *Véhi Ciosane* lies in two Sembénian preoccupations. First, truth-telling emerges as a predominantly verbal exercise, thereby giving *Véhi Ciosane* eminence in the study of orality. Secondly, truth is problematized through aggressive discourse that tends to be unequivocally egalitarian, as Sembène appropriates the voice of the marginalized to denounce demagoguery. In order to appreciate the import of *Véhi Ciosane* as a precursor of Sembène’s best-

³⁰ My italics.

known works, we must pay particular attention to two of its main characters, the griot Dèthyé Law and the suicidal Ngoné War Thiandum. These two qualify as powerful parrhesiastes who emblemize social awakening within an intellectually vapid environment. This trait is later incarnated by characters such as Rama in *Xala* and the journalist Kad in *Le dernier de l'empire*. Equally important is the fact that *Véhi Ciosane* is imbued with frenetic energy that borders on the psychotic, which will become the hallmark of Sembène's novels and films.

In *Véhi Ciosane*, Sembène utilizes geographical space, insanity, and aggressive dialogue to advocate parrhesia. Although the author underwent little formal education,³ his subversive characters use Socratic discourse as a method of deconstructing prevarications that are meant to maintain the status quo. Sembène uses complex signifiers whose poetic value is geared toward discussing truth-telling as a social exercise. The marginalized village of Santhiu-Niaye emerges as a code that represents a larger socio-geographic entity. The incest that is consummated by Guibril Guedj and his daughter Khar Madiagua Diob is not so much a sin in the religious sense; rather, it is a symptom of intellectual laziness, a weakness that corrupts not just individual minds but entire societies.

In the story, Khar's generation has lost the art of composing poetry and chooses instead to recite the work of others. It is this regurgitation of old ideas that relegates Santhiu-Niaye to backwardness, making it vulnerable to decay. Sembène weaves together four serious crimes that are committed in quick succession by the members of a very religious family. As Santhiu-Niaye is confronted by problems that it has never faced before, people have to choose between thought and belief. Therefore, like all Sembène's subsequent novels, *Véhi Ciosane* is thoroughly subversive. However, apart from the obvious structural differences between the novella and the novels (such as length), in *Véhi Ciosane*, the search for the truth is so urgent that much of Dèthyé

Law's discourse borders on blasphemy. This in itself is not surprising given that the author was a Marxist when he wrote the story. Nevertheless, what is particularly interesting is that the truth that Dèthyé Law and Ngoné seek can only be revealed to society through aggressive dialogue, which is akin to what Foucault expounds in *Fearless Speech*.

The drama of *Véhi-Ciosane* takes place in a marginalized village, Santhiu-Niaye, in the northwestern region of Senegal. While the narrator does not specify a date, the story transports the reader back to colonial times. The French *Commandant de cercle* visits Santhiu-Niaye once a year to collect taxes. Nevertheless, the village is neglected by the authorities, who leave it completely undeveloped, as is made clear by the omniscient and omnipresent narrator: "Il n'y avait ni école, ni dispensaire, et pourquoi faire un commissariat?" (22). Due to its inaccessibility and poverty, Santhiu-Niaye degenerates into an alcove of desperation. Its inhabitants abandon themselves to the mercy of natural elements and unpredictable seasons. To make matters worse, the village is slowly dying because its youth opts to immigrate to the city in a quest for a better life. Under such conditions, the people of Santhiu-Niaye do not trust one another: "La singulière nature du niaye soudait et divisait les gens" (25). Yet, patriarchal ties are still intact. The arrangement of homes is determined by blood relations and social ranks, all of which are male-dominated. It emerges that this patriarchy is the root of Santhiu-Niaye's problems—particularly because the custodians of custom choose to promote ignorance in the rank-and-file so that they can avoid trouble and keep their privileged positions in the colonial order. The society is therefore exposed not only to physical danger due to its geographical location but also to a more serious vulnerability: intellectual sloth. The narrator captures this susceptibility by likening the village to a frightened girl who sleeps outdoors during a cold night: "les huttes couchaient le soir comme une fille frileuse, peureuse, nue, les mains jointes entre les cuisses" (25).

The Quran appears to be the only source of knowledge in Santhiu-Niaye. The villagers are ardent Muslims among whom: “le Paradis d’Allah, comme un clou planté au centre de leur cerveau, pierre angulaire de toute leur activité au jour le jour, amoindrissait, ébréçait la vive imagination pour l’avenir” (23). Islam—“the will of God” in Arabic—is a rigorous religion whose moral code cannot be broken without the most serious consequences. A practicing Muslim, by definition, cannot deviate from a path of strict morality. Sembène’s biography shows that he followed this spiritual path early in his life. Gadjigo (55) records that between 1940 and 1944, Sembène was a staunch member of the Layène Brotherhood, an Orthodox Islamic sect founded in Senegal in 1884. During those years, the young Sembène “shaved his hair and sang at the top of his lungs until the break of dawn during the Layène religious nights” (56). *Véhi Ciosane* was thus perceived as all the more scandalous, which, in Sembène’s works, necessarily translates into intellectually provocative.

As the narrative begins, the reader is confronted by the fact that Guibril Guedj Diob has impregnated his daughter Khar Madiagua Diob. The Islamic *Sharia* stipulates that a woman who becomes pregnant outside wedlock should be stoned to death. In the case of Khar, the sin is compounded by the fact that she has slept with a married man who also happens to be her father. Meanwhile Guibril has committed a completely unnecessary transgression because he already has two wives—his religion allowing him to marry up to four. The narrator repeatedly states that Guibril enjoys the privileged position of “l’époux-maître après Yallah” (31). In this regard, Sembène is not making a critique of the Quran per se; rather, it is Guibril who has made commitments that he refuses to satisfy. This “master” is an obvious failure because, apart from his *fainéant* attitude, he neither makes the right moral decisions, nor does he do anything to

elevate the community he is supposed to lead. He lives to the detriment of that society, an entity whose anguish is emblemized by his first wife, Ngoné War Thiandum.

Ngoné's long soliloquys are parrhesian because the heroine puts her own life in danger to attack an unfair system. In Foucault's words, the true parrhesiastes is the one who risks death "to tell the truth instead of reposing in the security of a life where the truth goes unspoken" (7).

However, despite the obvious threat of death from the Other, Ngoné completes her mission by committing suicide. Her obsession with death comes primarily from shame; she is, after all, the descendant of a royal family. In her mind, it is inconceivable that her lineage be sullied in her lifetime. But her act has a vindictive twist to it as well. In her own society, suicide is no less sinful than murder. By killing herself, Ngoné exposes Guibril's incest to scrutiny and forces the whole society to examine itself. That is why her psychosis and eventual suicide can best be understood through the prism of subjugation and liberation. However, the suicide itself would lose its redeeming power if it was not preceded by Ngoné's repeated diatribes against injustice. In purely religious terms, Ngoné's outbursts are intolerable. Sembène subtly dramatizes this fact by confining his heroine to her compound. The artist's symbolic cloistering of his heroine only aggravates her madness, thereby making her complaints even more urgent and credible. In such circumstances, spatial constraints do not translate to a limited circulation of the truth. The traditional image of the martyr who would placate the Self through silent suffering is subverted in several ways. Ngoné is clearly aware that for Guibril to enjoy his many pleasures, she is obliged by her religion to remain humble and docile. In her anger and frustration, Ngoné courageously addresses God himself, reminding Him that she has never failed to obey Guibril. Ngoné's innocence accentuates her husband's excesses. Noting that Guibril had the means to satisfy his desires without stooping as low as sleeping with his own child, Ngoné asks: "Pourquoi

cet acte?” (6). Although the monologues are addressed to either Ngoné herself or her God, it is obvious that the reader faces the challenge of seeking answers to her questions. This burden is shared by Ngoné’s griot, Gnagna Guissé.

Apart from the physical geography that I have outlined, *Véhi Ciosane* explores another, more subtle space, encompassing the psychic, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human existence. In Ngoné’s case, all these spheres successively degenerate as the narrative progresses. Unsurprisingly, Ngoné’s life orbits around her family and her religion. Her identity is defined by the balance between her duties as a wife, mother, and devout Muslim woman. The incest consummated by Guibril and Khar topples this state of affairs, causing a disequilibrium that culminates in insanity. Ngoné’s status as Guibril’s wife cannot allow her to be the grandmother of his child. She cannot be Khar’s mother and co-wife at the same time. What this means is that family ties have been severed by an act that is completely unwarranted. In spite of her innocence, Ngoné’s existence is poisoned. Once she discovers her daughter’s waywardness and her husband’s utter hypocrisy, her world is sullied and everything in it becomes impure. Nothing short of the annihilation of the Santhiu-Niaye can alleviate her anguish: “Sur l’écran de sa pensée, elle assistait avec satisfaction à l’engloutissement par les dunes, une par une, des concessions et de leurs habitants”(31). Khar’s senselessness leads to her mother’s derangement and subsequent suicide.

Ngoné’s psyche therefore operates within a fragile cosmos where the actions of the Other translate to malaise, guilt, and eventual destruction of the Self. Guibril, meanwhile, shows no remorse throughout the drama. The fact that he is a spiritual leader does not inhibit his lowest animal desires. Indeed, he would rather sacrifice his family to advance his mediocre political interests. The narrator recounts that, to win the favor of the colonial administrators, Guibril sent

his son Tanor to the Second World War, from which he came back with a mental illness. Once again, Guibril emerges as the agent of madness. While he maintains a surprising *sang-froid* during the disaster, he causes dementia to those who are most loyal to him. However, unlike Euripides's Apollo in *Ion*, Guibril's silence stands out not as a well-calculated political strategy but a sign of dull-mindedness. Just like his daughter, Guibril does not think. More importantly, he is unable to consider the others even if his life would disintegrate without them. He is the parasite that kills its own host. If Ngoné's discourse brings light to darkness, Guibril's silence does the opposite. In fact, this patriarch destroys himself by promoting falsehood. His poisonous silence precipitates Ngoné's suicide and Tanor's parricide.

This unflattering figure of an ostentatious but ineffective patriarchy runs throughout Sembène's written and filmic texts. In *Xala*, El Hadji Beye shows total indifference toward all but himself.

In *Le dernier de l'empire*, Son Excellence Léon Mignane plunges his country into a coup d'état because of his feeble-mindedness and lust for power. The wealthy and the mighty have no reason to change a society that favors them. That is why Sembène uses the voices of the socially-disadvantaged to combat hegemony. In this way, many Sembenian characters function as provocative tools meant to elicit thought. The men and women who populate his work hardly ever function as peculiar human beings but rather as prototypes. It is for this reason that Guibril Diob can be viewed not as an individual with psychological depth, but rather as one among many Sembénian models. Their names always hint at their species: El Hadji Beye (*Xala*), El Hadji Mabique (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu*), and His Excellency (*Le Dernier de l'Empire*). In other words, Guibril does not embody a condemnation of Islam as such, but rather an object of shame in a society that badly needs to regain its dignity. The poverty and degeneration of the Santhiui-Niaye is a microcosm of a bigger reality in many African states not only during colonialism but

also after independence. Guibril observes Islamic rituals as rigorously as El Hadji Mabigue in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. The latter has satisfied the fifth pillar of Islam, the Hajj, which does not stop him from exploiting his compatriots and participating in the plunder of his country.

In *Véhi Ciosane*, incest denotes a more subtle lewdness that is ideological in nature. In *Xala*, Sembène depicts a closed—or incestuous—nouveau-riche club. The limited interaction between the members of the Dakar Chamber of Commerce can produce nothing more than a feeble-minded class that survives on crumbs and handouts. In Sembène's fiction, sexual symbols reveal the inefficacy of political systems that have no real intellectual backing. El Hadji Beye's impotence in *Xala* is an extension of the sterility of Léon Mignane's presidency in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. To compensate for the ineptitude of his government, Son Excellence propagates an absurd national philosophy known as Authénégraficanitus. As Murphy observes, this is a direct attack on Léopold Sédar Senghor, a major proponent of Négritude (196). However, other African leaders such as Mobutu Sese-Seko propagated similar national ideologies that had very little substance. During Daniel Arap Moi's kleptocratic rule in Kenya, a featherbrained ideology called *nyayoism*³¹ was marketed as a philosophy even as theft and murder were institutionalized. It is such ideologies that Sembene condemns in his prelude to the short story:

La débilité de l'HOMME DE CHEZ NOUS – qu'on
nomme notre AFRICANITE, notre NEGRITUDE, - et qui,
au lieu de favoriser l'assujettissement de la nature par les
sciences, maintient l'oppression, développe la vénalité, le

³¹ *Nyayoism* was the brain-child of a group of pseudo-intellectuals who surrounded Moi throughout his twenty-four years of despotic rule. The concept was poorly defined, and its most ardent proponents found it difficult to say exactly what it meant. However, *nyayoism* claimed to be founded on the three "national virtues" of love, peace and unity. *Nyayoism*'s detractors such as Koigi wa Wamwere have pointed out that while Moi was televised distributing candy to children, he stole from them even as he detained their parents without trial, tortured them and murdered them in his infamous Nyayo Chambers. Like Mignane, Moi's policies were actually made in London or Washigton. Kenyans often joked that they would continue following their leader's *nyayo* (footsteps in Kiswahili) as long as he did not step on London's excreta, in which case they would change course.

népotisme, la gabegie et ces infirmités par lesquelles on
tente de couvrir les bas instincts de l'homme – *que l'un de
nous le crie avant de mourir* – est la grande tare de notre
époque (16).³²

In coining the term Authénégraficanitus, Sembène seems to be practicing Voltairean satire, since the concept and its proponent evoke Pangloss, the professor of “métaphysico-théologico-cosmolonigologie” in *Candide*. Both Pangloss and Léon Mignane pose as great philosophers, but their over-optimistic assertions reveal a stunning myopia and intellectual superficiality. While Mignane would not like his country's dirty linen to be washed in public, his ministers masquerade behind his philosophy of Africanness in order to loot, exploit the people, and silence critical voices. In the novel, religion is used as a tool to discourage critical thought. Like Euripides's Apollo, the clerics in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* either mask the truth with silence or tell blatant lies.

It is therefore interesting to note that, in *Véhi Ciosane*, as the elders wrangle with Guibril's outrageous action, religion takes center stage. Sembène speaks through the unyielding griot Dèthyé Law, who insists: “Entre l'homme et Yallah, j'opte pour Yallah. Entre Yallah et la vérité, je suis pour la vérité” (73). Sembène thus forces his society to look at its naked self without flinching. That is why Ngoné refuses to suffer in silence. She talks at length, broadcasting the disgrace of her household. In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, it is the young journalist Kad who unmasks the indignities of Mignane's government, just as Rama confronts her father's hypocrisy in *Xala*.

³² My italics. The phrase “*Que l'un de nous crie avant de mourir*” reveals a personal commitment to truth. Sembène is here defining himself as a parrhesiastes.

The incest in *Véhi Ciosane* provokes a cascade of catastrophes that follow each other at breathtaking speed. Bestman has commented on the rhythm of Sembénian works, noting that the author's universe is constantly unstable, that the societies he describes are in a state of rupture (225). Although Sembène refuses to take a high moral ground, he shows that one cannot transgress against social norms without consequences. By seeking pleasure from his daughter's body, Guibril brings death to his wife and himself. Ngoné's suicide is an act of pride and resistance:

Comme un accroc, un tout petit trou, qu'elle même
par inconscience élargissait, elle accédait à cette
découverte—une démarche nouvelle—à juger tous
les événements, à partir de son moi de femme. Cette
nouvelle acquisition [...] chez un être dont jusqu'ici
l'opinion était décidé par autrui fut brutale. (32)

Ngoné's metamorphosis, however, comes too late. In Sembène's work, those who are docile are destroyed, just as those who hesitate during crucial moments. In *Xala*, a young girl (also named Ngoné) allows herself to be led into an unviable marriage with an old man. Her overbearing aunt, Yay Bineta, reduces her to a marketable object, a merchandise to be bought and sold. Because she does not assert herself, the young Ngoné's body is paraded before she is humiliated. In *Véhi Ciosane*, Ngoné has been silent for so long that she can only redeem her dignity by killing herself.

The villagers of Santhiu-Niaye rebuke Guibril's incest in many terms: "une turpitude," "une chiennerie," and even "un homicide moral" (89). The society of Santhiu-Niaye practices an

Islam that prescribes death by stoning for such a crime. In addition, their customary law decrees that the culprits be buried alive. Both sentences show how serious the sin is. Indeed, the metaphysical world is polluted because the ancestors themselves threaten to come out of their graves to punish the whole community. Ngoné reflects that Khar's child stands no chance of ever having a place in society. The newborn cannot even be named because it is impure. Ngoné's suicide places the villagers before an impasse because they can neither give their condolences to an incestuous daughter nor the man who has brought his wife to kill herself. To make matters worse, Guibril is an important man who is respected by the colonial government. His brother Medoune Diob wants him out of the way so that he can take the throne. He decides to use Tanor, an insane man, to interrogate Guibril about Khar's pregnancy. Their quarrel leads to patricide, which is arguably more serious than incest.

Silence plays a predominant role in the economy of the narrative. The society of Santhiui-Niayé initially opts not to discuss Guibril's incestuous act openly. While Guibril and his daughter are privately condemned, much is done to prevent their sin from becoming public. The patriarchs hide behind disbelief: "Je n'ose pas croire ce qu'on dit" (61). But once the patricide takes place, rumors must be replaced by open dialogue. It is Dèthyé Law who speaks the bitter truth; the fact that there are laws that prohibit incest means that it can exist and should be discussed: "Ce qui est faisable est matière à commentaire" (62). Law does not approve of his society's ostrich approach. Even the death of Ngoné is received with hypocritical and fatalistic discourse: "Yallah l'a appelée à côté de lui" (91). What is thus particularly revealing is that the guardians of social norms choose to cloak the truth. Only Law openly opposes this status quo, taking advantage of his ambiguous social standing as a griot to criticize the royalty that he is supposed to praise. Sembène identified himself with that social group, which he defined as an

“authentic witness of every event” (*L’Harmattan* 9). Yet, the griot’s voice can easily be ignored or ridiculed—precisely what occurs in the narrative. In a sense, the words of Law and his daring attitude translate to Sembène’s convictions about the truth and social justice. Bakhtin argues that “the artist’s struggle to achieve a determinate and stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself” (6). This is applicable to Sembène, whose principles are vocalized by Dèthyé Law in *Véhi Ciosane*.

The decisions that Ngoné makes just before she dies hold the key to Sembène’s philosophy as an artist. Acting against custom, Ngoné names Khar’s unborn child, to whom she also bequeaths all her jewels. Normally among the Wolof, jewels are handed down from mother to daughter, never from grandmother to grandchild. It is clear that great challenges require radical solutions. If customary law were to be carried out, both Khar and the child would have to be killed. Ngoné sacrifices herself to redeem her sinful daughter, who must promise to go into exile and look after the child. The redeeming name that Ngoné gives to the baby is also the novella’s title, *Véhi Ciosane Ngoné War Thiandum*. Since Santhiu-Niayé is not a conducive environment for a new beginning, Khar’s exile becomes necessary.

The narrator’s reaction to the newborn is startling and revealing. The little Véhi Ciosane is clearly the real heroine of the story. Her existence implies a radical generational change with far-reaching consequences. The destruction of the older Ngoné is inevitable: once she subverts the truth that she had hitherto lived for, she chooses to substitute herself with the most unlikely candidate—a bastard, the shameful result of an illicit affair. Even more problematic is the fact that Dèthyé Law is relegated to a secondary status once the child is born. He literally slips back into his old status, that of an insignificant man who lives for the truth for its own sake: “Je sais que quiconque, pour une fois, une seule fois, refuse de témoigner pour la vérité, dans son propre

pays, ne doit pas voyager. Car, de l'étranger, on n'a que son pays comme habit moral" (103).

Law says nothing else from that moment until the story ends. The narrator does not mention him again, and the reader can only assume that he will continue serving as griot for the Diob nobility. He has no choice because he was born as such. The ambiguity of Law's position resides in the fact that he remains the servant of a tarnished royalty, yet he refuses to be an agent of deceit. Since he regards truth-speaking as a duty, he is unlikely to be coddled by the corrupt nobility that he was born to serve. Yet, in the eyes of the reader, Dèthyé Law is a man of principle, a status which undermines social hierarchies. This is consistent with Sembène's vision of progressive African societies.

From the foregoing, it emerges that heroism itself is problematized, particularly because the child to whom the story is dedicated cannot even speak for herself. The novella's preface is unequivocal: "Pour toi, Véhi Ciosane" (17). The author's high-handedness is immediately justified by the observation: "c'est des tares d'un vieux monde que naîtra ce monde nouveau" (17). This claim to the possibility of a better life contains obvious socio-political overtones. The newborn is a living transmutation of truth, a fact that emanates from the last dialogue in the story. When Khar informs the driver that her child is female, he does not hide his chauvinism: "C'est dommage." But the name of the child throws him completely off-balance: "J'ai jamais entendu un nom pareil: Véhi Ciosane... De quel Thiandum est son père?" (108). Yet Sembène chooses this lowly candidate to be the progenitor of a new truth—one that reposes neither on purity nor piety, but rather on the fact that matters have been discussed openly. Dèthyé Law's earlier argument about the supremacy of truth above all else purifies the child, elevating her to the status quo of a very unusual hero. In other words, Véhi Ciosane Ngoné War Thiandum redeems her society because two socially-disadvantaged individuals opt to speak out. The two

parrhesiastes pay dearly for this: the older Ngoné has to die, and Dèthyé Law's outspoken nature disenchants the aristocracy. Truth-telling therefore comes at a price.

For Sembène, there are many ways to access truth, including the most unlikely ones. Dialogue is an important method of unmasking falsehood, hence the multiplicity of voices that interrupt each other in *Véhi Ciosane*. Indeed, silence itself can point toward truth. That is why, rather than vocalize an answer to the driver's last question, Khar hugs her baby and concentrates on the journey ahead. The future itself is a truth that must be faced regardless of what precedes it. What Sembène refuses to do, though, is to forget the past.

2.2 Memory and Parrhesia in *Emitai*

Like *Camp de Thiaroye*, *Emitai* dramatizes and fictionalizes a historical event: the Diola uprising that took place in 1942 in the Basse Casamance region, Southern Senegal. The spatial organization of the film correlates with the memories that Sembene evokes and eternalizes. The truth that is represented in *Emitai* is a horrifying one: the core of colonialism was pure armed robbery and murder. Therefore, there is a strong kinship between memories and places, giving the film a remarkable eidetic aura. The title of the film emblemizes the spiritual backbone of the novel: *Emitai* is the name of the Supreme Being of the Diola. The actual French-Diola conflict arose out of two concrete reasons that Sembene explores in the film: forced enlistment of the Diola in World War II and imposition of taxes³³. Samba Gadjigo points out that during the Second World War, "Casamance was subjected to six forms of tax collection: in addition to cash and soldiers, the region also provided rubber, cattle, rice [...] and even honey, since there was a shortage of sugar in France" (31). This was viewed as flagrant theft by the Diola. While the

³³ Sembene's position is supported by scholars such as J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder. See "West Africa, 1919-1939: The Colonial Situation," in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa II* (NY, 1977).

taxes assured the survival of France during the Occupation, they impoverished the Diola and destroyed their agriculture-based economy. Furthermore, the population was systematically decimated in two ways: the displacement of Diola youth and genocide.

Like *Camp de Thiaroye*, *Emitai*'s release was received with hostility. The film was banned in all African countries apart from Senegal (Perry and MacGillan, 38). The French reacted with even more acrimony. The ambassador of France to Guadeloupe prohibited the screening of *Emitai* in that island. Asked whether his film had ever been seen in France, Sembene answered that: "Every time I want to show this film, the date falls on "a day of mourning for de Gaulle." De Gaulle dies every day for my film (ibid. 39). When Sembene was invited to the Ivory Coast by students to show the film, it was the French embassy which coerced the president to stop the screening. This is an interesting case in which eight Ivory Coast officials saw nothing wrong in screening the film, only for two Frenchmen to interfere by going to the highest office in the land – in a sovereign African country. The best explanation for this antipathy towards *Emitai* is given by Sembene himself:

I myself came from this [...] region and these true events [...] inspired me to present an image of French conduct in my home territory during my early manhood. During the last World War, those of my age [...] were forced to join the French army. Without knowing why, we were hired for the liberation of Europe. Then, when we returned home, the colonialists began to kill us, whether we were in Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Algeria or Madagascar. (Perry and MacGillan, 40).

Emitai represents a society in which religion is intertwined with daily existence, so that socio-economic challenges have to be addressed in spiritual terms. For example, Kabebe repeats over and over that “rice is sacred to the Diola.” This is a “spiritualized” way of saying that rice is the staple diet of the Diola, and therefore any threat to its production and/or storage endangers the existence of the entire community. There is no demarcation between the material and the spiritual because the Diola do not hierarchize elements of existence; the women who work in the wet-fields are carrying out as spiritual an activity as the priests who oversee sacrifices in the shrines. The French misunderstand this situation completely and start propagating the lie that the Diola only grow rice in order to offer it to their gods. What they do not recognize is the fact that an economic conflict destabilizes Diola spirituality, inviting chaos that must be sorted out through all possible means.

Robert M. Baum (1999) shows that Diola religious belief was never static. Instead, it evolved as a result of the community’s interpretation of upheavals, both internal and external. According to Baum, environmental crises, insecurity and social tensions engendered modifications in Diola rituals. Such a description fits a very dynamic cosmos. In such a world, nobody and nothing is spared from change, not even *Emitai* and the communal spirits that mediate between him and the Diola. Yet, a community that commits decide continuously finds itself in exile, and that is precisely what happens in the film. Maurice Halbwachs calls attention to this: “Above all, when a society transforms its religion, it advances [...] into unknown territory” (86). To Halbwachs, stable religious beliefs underpin memory, which facilitates personal and collective identity. But, in *Emitai*, it is the gods themselves who invite trouble by failing to respond to an urgent situation, choosing instead to keep quiet. However, it is interesting to note that, even when Djimeko prophesies the death of the gods, he never

desacralizes them. Instead of a Nietzschean pronouncement (“God is dead”), Djimeko reminds the gods that the community’s life is just as sacred as they are, and therefore the deities cannot continue living when the Diola are dying.

Emitai’s intrigue is therefore two-fold, and this is brought out through the dyad speech/silence. While the patriarchs spend entire days at the shrine talking, waiting for their gods to act or at least speak up, the women choose the path of action. The men’s helplessness is foregrounded in their discourse: “The Whites have emptied the village through their war [...] I wonder what the gods think about it.” There is a strong relationship between patriarchy and the fetishes; sacrificing to the gods is exclusively a male enterprise. Yet, just as the gods are unassertive, the old men in *Emitai* are willing to acquiesce to detrimental orders from the French. The god’s passiveness is a reflection of the men’s resignation. But this attitude underpins a spirit of self-interest: the men will eventually forget group cohesion, opting instead to surrender their produce in order to ransom their individual families. The gods exist to justify the actions of a certain elite. Sembene came face-to-face with such a group of elitist patriarchs shortly after making the film: “They weren’t happy with the presentation of the gods. Though these forces did not manifest themselves when the French arrived, the gods were still sacred and helped the old men maintain authority” (Perry and MacGillan, 42).

Robert Baum’s account of Diola religion confirms Sembene’s skeptical remark. Baum shows that, as far back as the slave trade, ascension to Diola priesthood was determined by the amount of wealth that an individual possessed: “The shrine of the elders [...] created in the later eighteenth century to control the activities of the priest-king, was structured in such a way that wealth became a critical factor for participation in its rights” (125). In order to complete the four stages of initiation that one had to undergo before having access to the shrine’s esoteric

knowledge, one had to be very wealthy because every stage demanded expensive sacrifices (126).

In a way, this exclusivist approach to religion promotes innovativeness among the womenfolk. Ostracized from the secrets of the shrine, the women are unfettered, and therefore they can hide their rice without consulting the gods. The spectator is transported to a mystical world; the screen turns bluish as the women carry their rice into the bushes under moonlight. The camera moves back and forth, from the wet fields where the farmers work hard to grow their rice, then to the French Commandant who decrees that the crop must be taken by force. Ironically, there are only two French officers in the film. The actual crimes will have to be committed by African tirailleurs, led by Sergeant Badji. In order to distinguish him from the community that he will massacre, Badji is armed with a revolver, a good command of the French language, and a military uniform.

In *Emitai*, Sembene uses a wide variety of directorial techniques that tend to unite the spectator with the plight of the Diola. For example, Sembene makes use of long takes to show the women rowing their boats, toiling in the wet fields, or hiding their produce under moonlight. This is juxtaposed with the image of the French officer who announces that the Diola's produce must be confiscated by force. This use of long duration shots in cinema was first celebrated by André Bazin who attributed to it the power to elicit the spectator's sympathy, converting the latter to a participatory audience. In other words, the spectator identifies with the image in the long take. By interchanging the images of the toiling women with the conniving colonial administration, Sembene creates two irreconcilable worlds that must clash. The external conflict is therefore inevitable. But the internal dissention between the Diola and their gods takes a different direction: it is an inward journey which culminates with Djimeko's rebellion.

Emitai exploits this internalization of issues, contrasts it with the gods' silence, and shifts the paradigm of self-awareness to communal grief. By continuing to sacrifice for uncooperative deities, the elders are attempting to externalize their problem – that is, to surrender their fate to an invisible and unknowable cosmos. In the midst of all this helplessness, debate rages on: “First the Whites wanted our sons [...]. Now it is our rice.” Kabebe leads the group that seeks the solution in communing with the gods. Djimeko loses his patience: “Where were the gods when the Whites razed the village?” This relationship with truth is what distinguishes Djimeko as the only parrhesiastes in the entire film. Actually, he matches his words with his deeds, leading a group of young people to the battle ground. However, their bows and arrows hit no target, while the tirailleurs bullets fill the ground with corpses. Djimeko's armed insurgency does not accomplish much. If anything, it results in many unnecessary deaths. But he will lead yet another revolt.

Emitai constantly shifts from fundamentals, celebrating imagination for its own sake. One of the most powerful sequences in the film is the one in which Sembene represents Diola gods as physical entities that the spectator can feel and see. This appears to be a stark contradiction to Sembene's claim that “these forces did not manifest themselves when the French arrived.” However, I propose that this sequence vitiates “reality”, celebrating its own artistic nature. Being fantasy, art is able to do what does not happen in real life. Before Djimeko's attempt at an armed resistance to the French, the gods are completely absent from the screen. Their presence is only manifested by the elaborate shrine where the elders pour libations and other sacrifices. But, when Djimeko is wounded on the battlefield, he is returned to the shrine where his peers plead with him to ask for the gods' forgiveness. All of a sudden, the spectator is confronted with the new responsibility of suspending his or her disbelief. Here, Sembene resorts

to magical realism, plunging the viewer to the world of the spirits. The natural and the supernatural blend rather rapidly. Used to the fact that the gods are inept and self-effacing, the spectators suddenly find themselves face-to-face with supernatural beings who are not altogether impotent. The screen turns red; thunder and lightning strike, and the earth trembles as the gods voice their anger: "Is rice more sacred than we are?" To this egocentric discourse, Djimeko responds fearlessly: "Are you more sacred than our lives? What have you done for us?" While the other elders are cowed by the gods' show of might, Djimeko reads fear in the deities' reaction: "I am a danger for you!" With that, he prophesies the death of the gods: "I will die, but you too will die!" The fact that the gods can kill Djimeko in the shrine reverses the ineptitude that has been assumed all along.

Yet, from that moment onwards, it is Djimeko's body that dominates the film, relegating the shrine to an ineffectual locus in which even the humblest of elders can declare: "Djimeko doubted our gods. I also have begun to doubt." The camera's attention shifts from the shrine to Djimeko's body which is covered in an ornate red shroud. His bier has two big horns, duplicating and supplanting the shrine. In a way, the village acquires a second locus of collective identity and memorialization. When the funeral procession begins, the fallen warrior is addressed with adoration. He has become "the fearless" and "the indomitable." The gods' diffidence and self-effacement has put them at risk. The community is ready to replace them.

In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, the Diola's spiritual innovativeness is reflected upon by Cheikh Tidiane Sall. It appears that, in periods of vicissitude, the Diola displace an older spiritual order with a new one. However, Tidiane is partially skeptical to the whole enterprise because, rather than being a complete overhaul, he sees an element of recycling in it:

Le beekin est un fétiche-roi. Et lorsqu'il cesse d'incarner le totem, les Diolas le fustigent avant de le jeter. Un nouveau beekin est cherché, choisi dans le même bois, qui a poussé dans le même humus. Ils demanderont, avec la même exigence, à ce nouveau beekin de leur dispenser le même magnétisme [...]. Et si ce second fétiche-roi ne leur donne pas satisfaction, ils le renverront, l'injurieront en le couvrant de crachats. Ils se prépareront à accueillir avec le même cérémonial le troisième beekin. Sais-tu où ils vont aller le chercher? [...] Dans le tas de cendre des Beekin (Vol. 1, 166).

In this quotation, Cheikh Tidiane Sall is comparing French politics with Diola fetishism. To Tidiane, Léon Mignane faces the danger of being treated like a tired Diola beekin, but the French will still replace him with his own ilk. Considering a good substitute for Mignane, the ambassador Jean de Savognard picks Daouda: "l'un des meilleurs produits de l'école coloniale, Daouda représentait son greffon" (Vol.1, 38). The intertextual value of the beekin metaphor is quite clear in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*. In *Emitai*, the implication is more subtle. As a sight of communal memory, the ineffectual shrine will have to be replaced (or modified) at one point. To support this, I propose a closer look at the daily sacrifices that are carried out on the old altar. The elders offer chickens, goats and wine libations to deities who pay them back by refusing to intercede in the community's ordeal. Whenever an animal is killed, its blood is poured onto the altar, and when the last drop has fallen, the animal is thrown away. But the community's livelihood is under threat; their staple diet is going to be robbed by force. The spectator can feel

the elders' frustration even as they continue believing in their fetish. Djimeko's death is a turning point in the whole intrigue. The shrine has lost its appeal. In contrast to this, Djimeko's body becomes a powerful sign which is imbued with totemic significance.

In order to initiate the shrine's erasure from the collective identity, the fallen warrior's body supplants the absent gods, imposes itself as a referent for communal identity, and dictates the new rhythm of the narrative. It reintroduces the dyad memory/trauma. If Djimeko has been erased through death, the presence of his body is a testament of the truth at stake. The men's choices are very lean: "Live with this shame or die." The women mourn for the elder even as the *tirailleurs* continue surrounding them at gun-point. This communal agony reaches its zenith when the *tirailleurs* kill a child. The women take his corpse, drape it in a red cloth and chase the *tirailleurs* who are guarding Djimeko. In a way, Djimeko's *parrhesia* has energized the womenfolk, inspiring a second insurgence. When the women take over Djimeko's remains, the patriarchs' claims to superiority are undermined.

The film's ending foregrounds the instability of the pair colonizer/colonized. Since the Diola women have decided to die fighting rather than give up their dignity for good, the French resort to brutal murder. None of the Diola are armed by the time the order to shoot is given. The only thing between them and their killers is baskets of rice. Yet, in response to the *tirailleurs'* gunfire, the screen goes completely blank. The spectator would expect cries of agony in such a situation, but none of that happens. The colonized has been wiped out, but the colonizer has also disappeared from the screen. The French empire has committed suicide. In a way, Djimeko's *parrhesia* has brought this double demise. Furthermore, as Djimeko prophesied, the gods also die with the community, and it will be difficult to believe in their power at any other moment. .

2.3 Parrhesia in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*

In chapter one, I propounded that the aesthetic value of *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is heavily built on the oxymoronic pair Tidiane/Mignane. Studied as an indissoluble couple, these two statesmen emblemize the conceptual element memory/forgetting, which is the leitmotif around which the whole novel is built. It is clear that, just as there can never be memory without forgetting, Tidiane cannot function as an effective character without Mignane. Indeed, the president's forgetting, like his absenteeism, spurs Tidiane to search for meaning by rummaging through his entire life. In this regard, Tidiane gets involved in a philosophical search which takes the shape of an artistic endeavor – that of writing an autobiography. Charles Taylor (1989) argues that “we find the sense of life by articulating it” and that “finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate” (18). That is precisely what Tidiane does after resigning from the government. Additionally, by giving Tidiane the prerogative of writing memoirs, Sembene invites the reader to ponder about the import of that particular literary genre.

In the context of *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, the most remarkable cue concerning African autobiography is that of *lack*. To begin with, African statesmen have shied from writing their own life histories.³⁴ This should surprise no one given the intellectual paucity and deceitfulness portrayed by that political class. It is true that some wealthy African leaders have paid professional biographers to do the job for them, but even these are scanty and sporadic.³⁵ Cheikh Tidiane Sall is therefore filling a deficiency. Yet, Tidiane's intention plunges the reader into

³⁴ Nelson Mandela broke this tradition in 1995 when he published *Long Walk to Freedom*.

³⁵ For example, the British biographer Andrew Morton was paid to write *Daniel Moi: The Making of an African Statesman* (1999). Morton's account of Moi's life is fraught with omissions and blatant lies, a tendency which led Ngugi wa Thiong'o to satirize that biography in *Wizard of the Crow* (2007). In Ngugi's novel, a kleptomaniac African tyrant is eulogized by a European biographer by the name of Henry Morton Stanley. By giving Andrew Morton the name of a colonialist-explorer, Ngugi insinuates that Moi is a minion of British imperialism, which echoes Sembene's sentiments about Mignane in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*.

another problem which belongs to the domain of truth-writing and/or truth-speaking: that of sincerity. Since Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1789), autobiographical texts tend to be read with skepticism because their writers' candor is inevitably put into question. For, when Rousseau promised his reader to write the truth and nothing but the truth, he opened a door through which many queries as to his sincerity flew in. It did not take his readers too long to realize that the "truth" in the *Confessions* was compromised by a self-pitying tone, the writer's inclination to absolve himself and, more importantly, his penchant for benefitting from hindsight to impose some polished ideals onto his childhood. As a writer, Rousseau uses incidents from his childhood to support theories that can only interest a philosophizing adult. In other words, if the little Rousseau could have been spanked by Mademoiselle Lamercier, the autobiographical adult reports that he derived sexual pleasure from the beating, then goes ahead to show how *such an incident* can affect the psychological development of *any child*. By moving from the particular to the general, the adult autobiographer is giving full rein to speculation. The reader knows that a child is not a little adult; when a boy steals an apple, the least of his concerns would be to prove how society can corrupt the most innocent of children.

In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, Tidiane Sall proves to be a reliable autobiographical parrhesiastes for a number of reasons. First, he is able to use the Other as a mirror image through which he constructs a genuine Self-identity. But this transformation takes a long time due to life-long contamination with assimilationist ideas. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, identification is mediated through the recognition of the Self in the mirror image, which simultaneously initiates the subject to the symbolic domain of language. Ironically, Tidiane Sall's best mirror presents itself as his son Badou whose ideology is diametrically opposed to his own. Interestingly, Badou Sall is the spitting image of Tidiane Sall. Yet, for decades, the father

has averted his gaze to deny this likeness of himself. This repugnance is a sign of self-denial. The father remembers that, during de Gaulle's visit to Senegal in 1958, Badou Sall had led a group of radical students whose banners read: "NOUS VOULONS NOTRE INDEPENDENCE IMMEDIATE!" (Vol. 1, 66). In that era, Tidiane was a die-hard pro-Gaullist who considered Senegal to be a part of France. However, what hurt Tidiane Sall most was not his son's demands for a free Senegal, but rather the hostile gaze that this attracted from the other pro-Gaullists: "Il était la cible de tous les regards réprobateurs. Si, à la minute, une arme à feu avait été à sa portée, il aurait abattu Badou" (ibid.). Later, the same Tidiane sloughs his skin like a snake in order to reap the benefits of the very independence that he was opposed to. Two decades after the incident, the transformed father recognizes the import of his son in his own development, addressing him with admiration:

Où as-tu puisé cette sève qui coule en toi? De moi
[...] tu as tout rejeté. Comment as-tu fait pour
échapper au sortilège européen avec ta formation ?
Moi, Léon Mignane, les anciens combattants des
deux guerres, malgré le tiédissement de nos
rapports avec l'Europe, nous lui restons attachés. A
défaut du sein maternel, on tête celui de sa marâtre
(Vol. 1, 68).

Tidiane initiates his own emancipation through merciless soul-searching and self-criticism. By equating himself with a brat that has sucked a cruel step-mother's breast, the old man is confessing that he has not always been as selfless as his son would imagine. In 1914, Tidiane had campaigned for the enlistment of Senegalese youth in the First World War. Yet, when he

arrives in France under that pretext, he seeks protection from Wellé and studies as the others get killed in the war:

Parmi les milliers de soldats en partance pour les horizons glacés, un seul bénéficiera d'une situation exceptionnelle: Cheikh Tidiane Sall. Il ne connaîtra pas le baptême du feu; protégé du député, couvert par la renommée de son père qui [...] avait fait scruter six de ses fils. En 1918, il obtient ses bacs, pour enfin s'inscrire à la faculté de droit de Paris (Vol. 1, 52).

Tidiane therefore traces his early success to his ties with France. Yet, the same sojourn cost him three brothers who got killed during the First World War. Speaking to Badou, he admits that he had sided with the privileged in order to ascend to the top: "J'ai été un publiciste pour Pascal Wellé. J'ai servi de marchepied pour Léon Mignane" (ibid). What is even worse, he did not believe in independence because he was convinced that he was French: "Ma francité m'atteint là (Sa main passa au dessus de sa crane rasé). Elle m'etouffe" (ibid.). This feeling of suffocation is slowly overcome by an acceptance of the Self which must nonetheless be adjudicated by excavating his soul for unflattering memories: "Chacune des phrases avait été un long labeur de fouille et de jour et de nuit en son for intérieur" (Vol.1, 55). From this "digging" into his past, he realizes that he has wasted his time even as others take advantage of him to satisfy their ambitions: "De 1914 à ce jour, il n'avait été qu'un tronc flottant, servant à aider les autres à traverser la barre" (ibid.).

ˆ Tidiane's disclosure neutralizes and repudiates the false assimilationist hybridity that would otherwise occlude his metamorphosis. Apart from venturing in a thorough self-

examination, his parrhesia manifests itself when he fearlessly antagonizes the president of the Republic and his friend, Léon Mignane. His inability to celebrate his own prosperity as a government minister stems from the critical approach that he adopts in all matters concerning the body politic. This harsh judgment of the present is a manifestation of the memories that he harbors, such as the trauma of losing three brothers in a war that he had supported. That is why, whenever the president goofs, Tidiane is transported back to his dealings with Pascal Wellé whom he regards as Mignane's alter ego. His preoccupation with truth espouses a sense of otherness that puts him at loggerheads with the whole cabinet. When Mam Lat floats the idea of buying a presidential Boeing, it is Tidiane who quickly realizes that the idea could only have come from Mignane himself. Again, while all the twenty-two ministers sheepishly entertain the idea of buying the jet at a time when half the country is dying of hunger, nobody but Tidiane questions the feasibility of the project: "Est-ce que je peux savoir combien va nous coûter ce jouet?" (Vol.1, 57). When Mam Lat informs the gathering that the president's "toy" would cost over three billion Senegalese francs, Tidiane is infuriated: "Comment le peuple va-t-il payer cette somme? Avec des coques d'arachides ou avec des tourteaux?" (ibid.).

Tidiane's parrhesian pursuit is coupled with his conception about the nature and applications of memory. He compares and juxtaposes his own personal memories with the history of Senegal. For example, he postulates that, in the colonial era, all the inhabitants of the four communes of Saint-Louis, Dakar, Rufisque and Gorée believed that they were more "civilized" than the other Senegalese just because of their contact with the Europeans.³⁶

³⁶ Since 1848, the French government recognized *les quatre communes* because of a substantial number of French colonists who settled there. Theoretically, any of the inhabitants of these communes had the right to French citizenship. That is why Sembene (as well as his father) was a French citizen until 1960. The four communes could also elect a *député* to represent them in the French parliament. In the novel, Pascal Wellé is the first African *député*. However, because colonialism is racist by nature, even the most educated of the Africans in these communes were never treated as equals to the Europeans; the highest echelon that the most educated of them could attain was that of

Consequently, Tidiane's biography is undeniably inscribed in the history of Franco-Senegal relations with all their contradictions: "Je suis de deux époques. Plus de la moitié de ce siècle, je me suis convaincu que j'étais Français. J'avais tout fait pour être reconnu comme tel" (ibid. 67). By espousing this European Otherness, Tidiane became alienated; he belonged to those whom the Wolof called *tubab bu nuls*, that is, black Europeans. This social schism engendered a more dangerous psychic rupture which is illustrated by his wife's attitude towards her neighbors in the 1940s. When their daughter breaks her arm during play time, Djia Umrel Ba prohibits all African children from coming to her house. But, looking at the situation from the reverse in his old age, Tidiane later realizes that it is his family that ended up proscribing itself, becoming alien in its own country. So, when he meets the journalist Kad after the disappearance of president Mignane, the old statesman exclaims: "Toi, au moins, tu peux dire que tu es un repère dans notre famille" (Vol. 2, 12). The re-entrance of Kad into this family symbolizes Tidiane's total social re-integration. From then on, the young journalist shares the old statesman's deepest memories and helps to organize them into a book. This collaborative writing becomes a healing exercise, which is also equated to a book of accounts: "Ce sera en quelque sorte notre bilan [...] bilan d'une époque" (ibid.25).

Although Tidiane's parrhesia sets off as a personal endeavor, it quickly assumes societal implications. During the celebrations of Léon Mignane's seventieth birthday, Tidiane takes advantage of a "national" event to interrogate existing political ideologies and structures, laying bare the internal tensions that erode cohesion and hinder prosperity. Evidently, the president's mistake is to underestimate his Minister for Justice, mistaking him for a minion who would eulogize him. The fact that Tidiane's speech is unwritten undermines everything that Mignane

an *évolué*. Ironically, the *évolués* identified with the Europeans, creating a barrier between themselves and the other Senegalese whom they considered to be less civilized.

believes in; the president takes himself for an author and a political theorist. But Tidiane has already recognized the futility of theories that are written in languages that the citizenry does not care to learn. He starts his speech as a memory, shifting the focal point from an individual's date of birth to a nation's history:

Si du temps de ma jeunesse, le système d'alors,
communément connu sous l'appellation de colonialisme, ce
système, dis-je, assimilateur des premiers cadres, avait d'un
côté le souci de faire de nous des « Français », et de l'autre
celui d'accaparer des terres vacantes, aujourd'hui cette
méthode a fait son temps (ibid. 74).

In this unwritten speech, the old Doyen successfully deconstructs Mignane's political theorem. Instead of praising the "philosophy" of Authénégrofricanité, Tidiane undermines Mignane's romantic and purist conception of Africa: "Force est pour nous les Anciens [...] d'admettre que la morale ancienne, fossilisée, n'a aucune prise sur ce temps présent" (ibid.). Interestingly, the speaker focuses his attention on the youth, whom he regards as the future as opposed to the patriarch whose birthday is being celebrated. In fact, Tidiane blatantly calls the president a fake guardian of the "past":

Qui sert de modèle de ces jeunes? Une grappe d'individus,
légalisée dans la rapine de l'économie nationale, et qui
constitue une couche de privilégiés. Ces mêmes individus
bâtissent leur fortune sur la sécheresse ; se voulant
authentiques, leurs laïus se drapent des lambeaux de
l'ancienne culture agonisante (ibid.).

What Sembene is attacking here is a blind nativist ideology – which may well be none other than Senghor’s negritude. Be it as it may, the old man’s speech spells hard-headed defiance to any “national” ideology in which he reads poorly-camouflaged acquiescence to imperialism. This appears to be in keeping with Edward Said’s position that “to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism too willingly [...] To leave the historical world for the metaphysical of essences like negritude is [...] to abandon history” (1990, 82). When Tidiane talks of certain individuals who build personal fortunes from national disasters, he is pillorying the whole government, starting with Mignane himself. The word “*authentiques*” is a thinly-veiled reference to Authénégfricanitus and therefore a scathing attack on the president. Even the writings of Mignane are reduced to mere *laius* (screeds), which are draped in “threadbare traditions”. As a final blow, Tidiane transposes the president’s birthday to a collective event. Instead of addressing the nation in the name of Mignane’s birthday, he celebrates the whole country’s history: “Fêtons les vingt ans éternels de notre pays” (Vol. 1, 76).

Most African readers of *Le Dernier de l’Empire* (especially those who experienced the dictatorships of the 1970s to the 1990s) can quickly realize that Tidiane is playing with fire. This type of speech would be nothing short of a death-wish in any African country during that period. Indeed, African jails were full of political prisoners who were often detained without trial. In many cases, people like Tidiane were simply assassinated. But Léon Mignane’s reaction is more lucid and foresighted: “Il ne faut pas que ce vieux devienne un martyr” (ibid. 81). But, true to the president’s Machiavellian nature, this becomes yet another opportunity to prove his tolerance. While his Young Turks react with blind anger, the president does not even sack Tidiane. Instead he keeps him in the cabinet as a “living warning”: “En le gardant, il cautionne et justifie notre démocratie” (ibid.).

This show of bonhomie is nonetheless controverted when the president mockingly sends Tidiane some Marxist literature. In this self-defensive gesture, Mignane is doing what any pro-West person would have done during the Cold War period, that is, brand all those who oppose him as communists in order to silence them. But Léon Mignane is not *anybody*; he is the president of a nation whose history is fraught with tensions that need to be healed. His *parti pris* is therefore a most dangerous element of his leadership. This bias also spells debility in the president's intellectual formation. In Sembenian texts, every oppressor who does not measure up to the intellect of an opponent resorts to name-calling. In *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ibrahima Bakayoko is labeled as "communist" by de Jean; in *Camp de Thiaroye*, Labrousse uses the same trick on Sergent Diatta. To Mignane's subtle accusation, Tidiane responds by sending him texts by Franz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah. In chapter one, I applied Fanon's psychoanalysis on Mignane, showing that this president's biggest handicap stems from unresolved identity crises. Actually, by asking him to read Franz Fanon, Tidiane is challenging him *to know himself*. This discursive gesture is important because it dominates all the encounters that take place between the president and his Minister for Justice from that moment onwards.

I would like to interpret Tidiane's gesture in the light of Michel Foucault's *L'hermeneutique du sujet*, a text which juxtaposes the Delphic precept "Know Thyself" with "Take Care of Thyself." Foucault argues that *the care of the Self* is the foundation of knowing oneself: "S'occuper de soi, c'est se connaître" (68). In *L'hermeneutique*, Foucault refigures the concept of "spirituality", re-defining it as a set of practices that purify and transform the Self as a condition to accessing to truth: "on définit la spiritualité comme étant la forme de pratiques qui postulent que, tel qu'il est, le sujet n'est pas capable de vérité mais que, telle qu'elle est, la vérité est capable de transfigurer et de sauver le sujet" (20). Truth-seeking emerges as a reflexive

activity, which requires a special attitude towards the Self and the Other (10). Having accessed to truth, the Self can awaken an Other, but such an enterprise is not necessarily a pleasant one.

That is why Socrates (Tidiane's prototype) acts as a gadfly:

[...] cet insecte qui poursuit les animaux, les pique et les fait courir et s'agiter. Le souci de soi-même est une sorte d'aiguillon qui doit être planté là, dans la chair des hommes, qui doit être fiché dans leur existence et qui est un principe d'agitation, un principe de mouvement
(*L'hermeneutique du sujet*, 9).

It is clear that, as a subject, Tidiane is altered and transformed through traumatic experiences (such as the death of his three brothers in the war), but he also makes some bold spiritual choices that chart his new form of existence. His resignation from government is an act of renunciation that allows him to meditate about issues. The kind of "spirituality" that he engages in does not have a religious meaning *per se*; nowhere in the novel is Tidiane depicted as a religious figure. In fact, the only time he comes close to a mosque is the day he decides to walk home after resigning. Even then, he shows neither the intention nor the inclination to join the faithful. If anything, he overhears Muslim men whose sole reason for scrambling for places inside the mosque is to get some shade! The point I am making here is that Tidiane's spirituality is more inclined towards Foucault's definition of the term – that is, a well-defined set of activities that are aimed at raising the subject beyond the mundane so that the Self can adapt to truths that may not always be pleasant. It can therefore be argued that Tidiane abandons his job as a statesman in order to care for himself, and this in itself is a prerequisite for knowing himself before he can

awaken the Other. Analyzed in this light, the appellation *Joom Gallé* acquires its full Socratic sense, that is, the Master who enunciates: “Know Thyself.”

CHAPTER 4

MEMORY, TEXTUALITY AND MADNESS

In the last two chapters, I argued that, in Sembene's fiction and films, memory (or the lack of it) is often represented in the form of a void that in turn shapes the structure of the texts, determining their tone and rhythm. Together with this, there is a pervasive depiction of psychic distortions of various forms and degrees, all of which are informed by memory.³⁷ Yet, rather than act independently, such anomalies tend to be located within the relationship between the Self and the Other, making mental derangement an identitarian issue more than anything else. This is particularly so in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* where the president's grandiose visions shift from mere routine delusions about his "European identity" to the dramatically psychotic episode in which he recites his thesis on "*Afrique complément de l'Europe*" just before his deportation.³⁸ It can be argued, therefore, that in Sembene's texts, a poorly-managed tension between identity and alterity becomes a psychic drama that assumes bizarre forms, culminating in behavioral anomalies that are designed to capture the reader's attention with an intensity that provokes thought.

In order to fully appreciate the relationship between memory and madness as it emanates from the literary and cinematic texts of Sembene, it is necessary to give some quick caveats regarding the author's artistic and philosophical notions about mental illness. Obviously,

³⁷ In Sembene's texts, such distortions take various forms that normally fall under the broad umbrellas of neurosis and psychosis. Freud defines psychosis in terms of libidinal instincts and narcissism. He distinguishes neurosis from psychosis in the sense that the former stems from *repression* while the latter originates from *projection*. From Sembene's own work, it is clear that the author/director was well-versed with psychoanalytical theories given that he read (and recommended) Franz Fanon.

³⁸ Mignane is popularizing Anton Zichka's publication by the same title, which, ironically, is a Nazi imperialist text. I will come back to this in the current chapter.

Sembene is aware that there are many forms of madness, and that is why, in his films and prose, the symptomatology of mentally-ill characters is very diverse. Madness, therefore, is represented as a highly complex psychosocial phenomenon that defies a simple definition. All the same, I find Lillian Feder's operational definition of madness as an appropriate adoption for the purposes of analyzing Sembene. In *Madness in Literature* (1980), Feder defines madness as "a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience" (5). In Sembene's prose and films, madness takes forms such as excessive excitement (mania), overt obsessions with the Self or the Other, deliriums, melancholia, too much guilt (or lack of it), hallucinations and paranoia. Unsurprisingly, certain characters are represented as doubly insane entities, given that they portray a combination of symptoms. Indeed, some of these human figures are madness itself.

As to Sembene's attitude towards those who are inhabited by madness, it can at best be characterized as ambiguous. The writer/director quite blatantly refuses to limit himself to a consistent representation of madness, opting instead to exploit a wide variety of psychic aberrations that are often charged with metaphoric value. It is true that, due to their political significance, characters such as president Mignane emerge as contemptible. Yet there are certain personae that are treated with sympathy, namely the insane war veterans. Regarding this type of madman, Gadjigo (2001) observes that to Sembene, the war veteran, a living proof of the trauma resulting from a colonial conflict, is always a mentally disturbed person (121). I propose that Sembene's notions of the alienated war veteran respond to a persistent and personal psychological need – to pay homage to "his own type", that is, the African soldiers who either died or survived the two world wars. To some extent, Sembene's cinematic and literary

representations of mad people echo Antonin Artaud's declaration: "Les fous sont les victimes individuelles de la dictature sociale" (*Lettre aux médecins-chefs des asiles de Fous*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 267). This is particularly so because, even in the case of the most narcissistic and wicked characters such as Mignane and Guibril Diob, the reader realizes that there is always an external force, or a deeply-rooted unconscious crisis at work in the mind of the insane personae, rendering it possible to interpret their actions in terms of "the incomprehensible," which, by definition, is trauma.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the war veteran is portrayed as a special subject in Sembene's literary texts and cinema. It does not matter whether the war veteran was a mercenary who voluntarily gave his services for monetary gain, or whether he was hastily enlisted as a knee-jerk response to the military needs of an alien empire; the insane veteran is represented as a man who has no control over his violence. Thus, Tanor Diob's parricide reads like a remote-controlled act rather than a calculated murder, so that, although he is the one who carries out the actual parricide in *Véhi-Ciosane*, it is his uncle who would stand guilty were the reader to become a judge. That is why the parricide is also a fratricide – the older Diob gets rid of his brother Guibril for political expediency, and Tanor is a handy tool because he is insane and partly unaware of what he is doing. As Diob is excoriated, the war veteran is exonerated in the name of the trauma that he has undergone, and also the fact that he exists in the margins; once enlisted, he is exiled, and is never fully re-integrated in society. Furthermore, as a social player on the cinematic screen or the written text, the veteran emerges as a threatened species; being a witness to the weakness and the wickedness of an Empire that assumes superhuman powers, the veteran faces the danger of assassination as portrayed in *Camp de Thiaroye*. Consequently, the madness that inhabits Tanor Diob in *Véhi-Ciosane* can be interpreted as a "sociopolitical death"

that results from the insanity behind the colonial enterprise itself; all the more why Pathé's epitaph is a befitting albeit unsettling incipit for the story.

The second caveat that I propose is that, although different forms of madness operate in divergent ways, they do share a common origin, which I will trace to the relationship between the subject, memory and textuality. In the second chapter, I gave the example of a unique type of madness in Sembene's fiction, which is illustrated by the prolonged neurotic attack that paralyzes Ngoné War Thiandum in *Véhi-Ciosane*. I argued that Ngoné's fault is to avert her gaze from "unacceptable" truths for too long, exposing herself to psychological torture and destruction. During her hallucinations, Ngoné insists that she is an innocent victim simply because she *remembers* that she has never failed in any of her duties as a mother and/or wife. Actually, Ngoné's insistence on her innocence invites the reader's attention to its opposite – an obsession with guilt. As a Muslim mother and spouse, Ngoné regards her existence as a mere test, a rather prolonged prelude to an afterlife in which she will be judged harshly for the slightest of failures. Her life is therefore an incubation period, but, unfortunately, only bitterness and madness sprout from it, forcing Ngoné to commit the ultimate sacrilege of killing herself. Unsurprisingly, Sembene shows that the problem lays squarely in Ngoné's (mis)conception of morality, namely limiting oneself to only one authority and one text – which in *Véhi-Ciosane*, is the Quran. To make matters worse, even this singular textual authority is abused because it is the likes of Guibril Diob who assume the responsibility of translating and teaching it to the rest of the community. The griot Déthyé-Law interrogates the suitability of such ecclesiasts vis-à-vis their moral and intellectual penury. Therefore, in *Véhi-Ciosane*, the problematic of hermeneutics compounds that of the text as an agent of meaning and/or madness.

This representation of the text as a possible agent of insanity tends to be echoed and reverberated both within and between Sembene's productions, resulting in a disturbing iterance which functions in a non-linear, discontinuous manner, imitating memory. The resulting inbetweenness functions as the product of the problematic dyad of memory/trauma. Furthermore, since a work of fiction is a mere representation rather than a reality, if it subjects *textualism* to interrogation, then it renders itself as a re-representation, a *dedoublement* and a metafiction. That is why the reader/spectator can feel a shadow that lurks behind texts like *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, *Véhi-Ciosane* and *Ceddo*, scrutinizing them from a bird's eye-view and mocking those who mistake poetic texts for sources of practical truths that can be applied directly to life. Therefore, characters that portray an imbalanced affinity to texts are subjected to madness: Ngoné War Thiandum becomes neurotic because she literally believes in a text that blinds her to the real world, and Guibril Diob is reading his Quran when Tanor descends upon him. The love of a text (which is a disguised form of Eros) attracts the likes of Tanor, the crazy agents of Thanatos. This can be interpreted as Sembene's healthy skepticism towards (mis)reading texts. It is also a strong indication that the author knew the limits of his literary and cinematic activities. Therefore, looking for solutions to life's problems in any of his texts – or any other single text – would be a specious exercise.

From the foregoing, I propose that Sembene is a pluralist who democratizes the text, locating it within a multiple sphere in which the reader has the power to pick and choose. Djia Umrel Ba vocalizes this decentralization of texts in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*: “Allah n'est pas à la mosquée, pas plus que Jésus est à Rome! Ton livre doit nous ancrer dans la terre africaine” (Vol. II 210). The writer and his text are therefore defined in terms of “one among many” rather than “the one and the only”. The cinematic representation of this attitude can again

be found in the film *Faat Kiné* (2000) in which a muezzin's call for prayer goes hand-in-hand with the clanging of bells from a nearby church. In the same film, the main protagonist, who is a Muslim, dates a Roman Catholic who finally proposes marriage to her. In *Faat Kiné*, there is no indication that the Bible and the Quran are mutually exclusive; quite the contrary. There is even another possibility – that of a non-believing youth that is none the worse for its agnosticism. In *Faat Kiné*'s economy, texts and religious faiths emerge as social commodities that should be consumed with caution and common-sense. To entertain an exclusivist reading of a text or an author is to invite mental and spiritual disasters such as the ones represented in *Véhi-Ciosane*. Like Sembene, Edward Said (1978) observes that “to apply what one learns out of a book literally to reality is to risk folly or ruin” (93).

Such text-related psychosis first appeared in Francophone African literature in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961). In this novel, a young prince, Samba Diallo, undergoes a slow and life-long process of psychological cleavage that culminates in derangement and premature death. Samba is first subjected to physical and mental torture by his Quranic master, the ascetic Thierno who lives *for* and *in* what he calls “la parole” – which stands for the Quranic text in its unalterable and pure form. To safeguard this purity of “la parole”, it must be recited in its original language, Arabic. The terror of “la parole” appears right from the beginning of the novel where Samba experiences it as an incandescent, pain-generating power:

Ce jour-là, Thierno l'avait encore battu. Cependant, Samba Diallo savait son verset. Simplement la langue lui avait fourché. Thierno avait sursauté comme s'il eut marché sur une des dalles incandescentes de la géhenne promise aux mécréants. Il avait saisi Samba Diallo au gras de la cuisse, l'avait pincé du pouce et de l'index, longuement. Le petit enfant avait

haleté sous la douleur, et s'était mis à trembler de tout son corps. Au bord du sanglot qui lui nouait la poitrine et la gorge, il avait eu assez de force pour maîtriser sa douleur ; il avait répète d'une pauvre voix brisée et chuchotante, mais correctement, la phrase du saint verset qu'il avait mal prononcée (13).

Tierno is inhabited by a palpitating fear of hell, which makes him to torment his pupils in order to save them from what he perceives as a more dreadful pain in the afterlife. Diallo is subjected to this physical abuse from the age of seven, and he internalizes the continuous battering to the extent that, as an adult, he must accept the company of a violent mad man, le Fou, who kills him in the City of the Dead. Therefore, Cheikh Hamidou Kane represents trauma as a crazy companion (le Fou) who completes the job that Tierno initiates at the beginning of the novel. For, to both Tierno and le Fou, Samba's body must be destroyed in order to preserve the idealized subject, which is none other than "la parole". Another interesting fact is that this trauma must be dramatized as a recursive entity – Samba *dies* in the City of the *Dead* because he spent much of his childhood there, trying to speak to a *dead* woman, la Vieille Rella. Thierno's stigmaphobia therefore ferments and metamorphosis in the psyche of his pupil, manifesting itself as a necrophilia that is so pervasive that its full course must end violently, in the tomb.

From the aforementioned, one can understand why Diallo's tongue emerges as a Janus-faced object: "la parole" can only be recited by the tongue (la langue), yet it is the same tongue which tricks Diallo: "la langue lui avait fourché." The narrator is unequivocal: Diallo knows his verse, but *something* acts against his will. That thing is his tongue, which, to the master, represents an intractable body, an obstruction to a more superior entity. Thus, as a spiritual master, Tierno's goal is to teach his pupil how to dominate the body, to abnegate the Self, to

learn how to die rather than how to live well, and this must be done through a merciless process of disjointment. The body has to be separated from the soul, and that is why the novel is permeated by assertions such as “si mon corps m’obéira” (41). The words that the human subject utters seem to deny that very subject, to fragment it and to endow it with a lower status in the dichotomy that emanates from the discursive process.

In *L’Aventure ambiguë*, “la langue” is a double metonymy; it functions both as an organ, which is a part of the body, and also as human language itself. The expression “simplement la langue lui avait fourché” hits the reader with its full force when it is analyzed alongside the power accorded to “la parole”. Indeed, if Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory rests on the fact that “la langue” functions independently of the individual, superseding “la parole”, Thierno adopts the opposite conception. Rather than regarding “la parole” as a product of language, and therefore as subordinate to the latter’s rules, “la parole” imposes itself as an all-powerful subject that defies human understanding – which sends it to the realm of the “incomprehensible” and therefore the traumatic. That is why, rather than being interpreted or understood, “la parole” must be recited in an inflexible form. Defying the Saussurian tradition, “la parole” is superior to the language in which it is expressed. Therefore, even though the narrator unequivocally states that the human subject knows his verse (“Samba Diallo savait son verset”), his tongue fails at the critical moment, forcing the ascetic master to use all the means possible to remind his pupil that he is, after all, inferior to the very words that he recites. Therefore, Samba’s psychic trauma is quite easy to grasp: he is dealing with the unknown and the unknowable, yet he must live by the very dictates of this “incomprehensible” entity, “la parole”.

It can therefore be argued that, like Ngoné War Thiandum in *Véhi-Ciosane*, Samba Diallo’s insanity and premature death stem from a poor appraisal of the human subject in relation

to the text(s) that it consumes, memorizes and (mis)understands. This unhealthy “textual attitude” attains its zenith in the figure of León Mignane, a president-author whose sickness is represented as a double sense of lack – Mignane is an impotent father of the nation and a madman. Under his presidency, theoretical and poetic notions are transmuted to a practical “reality” that is applied in the body-politic, engendering generalized insanity that borders on the contagious.

3.1 Texts, Vacuity and Madness in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*

In *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud uses the nature and motivations of poetic imagination as an analogy to explain the relationship between fantasy, dreaming and madness. At a basic level, it can be argued that Freud was tapping from an old tradition: the relationship between writing (or telling stories) and madness is a time-honored trope. So, it is not surprising that, to the ancient Greeks, Apollo was the divine source of both poetry and medicine. Likewise, in Plato’s literary theory, to engage in writing is to expose oneself to being possessed by the Muses, which means that the writer must be ready to trek in unknown psychic territories. Although Plato considered poets as liars and liabilities in his ideal State, he nonetheless spent some time theorizing about the nature of poetic composition, if only to end up with a cyclical argument that foregrounds the general belief that writers are mad people who would achieve nothing without divine inspiration. In his *Ion* for example, Plato pits a rhapsody (an actor/reciter) against Socrates, who attributes the ability to compose and/or recite poetry to divine insanity: “[...] the authors of those great poems which we admire, do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art, but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and, as it were, possessed by a spirit not their own” (6). Evidently, the dialogue in *Ion* is meant to prove Plato’s assumptions about poets, namely, that they are “mere interpreters of the divinities – each

being possessed by one deity; and to make this apparent, the God designedly inspires the worst poets with the sublimest verse” (8). The belief that the writer is a “possessed being” is not unique to the Greeks. It is upheld in many cultures across the world: even holy writs are inspired by spirits of one form or the other, and that is why such texts must be interpreted in their own terms.

Freud diverges from this tradition of “divine inspiration”, proposing instead that writing is the product of subconscious desires into which a writer taps, aestheticizing the results of his peregrinations into the unconscious and presenting them in a form that must appeal to the reader’s secret fantasies. Veering off the path of divinities even further, Freud argues that writing is a socially-accepted act of day-dreaming. Indeed, like writers, all adults engage in all sorts of fantasies in order to substitute the desire to play; only that “normal adults” cannot reveal their day-dreams due to social sanctions:

As they grow up, people cease to play, and appear to give up the pleasure they derived from play. But anyone who knows anything of the mental life of human beings is aware that hardly anything is more difficult to them than to give up a pleasure they once tasted. Really we never can relinquish anything; we only exchange one thing for something else. When we appear to give something up, all we really do is to adopt a substitute. So when the human being grows up and ceases to play he only gives up the connection with real objects; instead of playing he then begins to create phantasy. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams (46).

The difference between child play and adult fantasies is therefore determined by *what* is desired, not *whether* there is desire or not. While the child is motivated by a strong wish to be a grown-up, the adult's day-dreams point at unfulfilled childhood desires which cannot be achieved in any realistic manner – principally because, with the lapsing of time, childhood is only a memory, a void. While the child has every reason to show off his fantastic creations that prove that he is indeed a grown-up, the adult's day-dreams must be concealed: "he cherishes them as his most intimate possessions and [...] he would rather confess all his misdeeds than tell his day-dreams" (ibid.). The secret workings of memory are the ligaments that tie unconscious desire with conscious fantasy, which means that the past and the present find common ground through the day-dream. By day-dreaming, the adults' subconscious is only remembering a time in their infancy during which their wishes were fulfilled. But, since the realities of the present paint a grim picture about wishful thinking, the adult imagines a future time during which the desires can be fulfilled. Thus, memory is the motor that energizes the normal adult's imaginary displacements through time: the past, the present and the future find their expression in the day-dream which must remain secret.

To Freud, mental illness manifests itself through a violation of this rule of secret day-dreaming: "If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the necessary conditions for an outbreak of neurosis or psychosis are constituted" (49). Madness, then, is the manifestation of uncontrollable unconscious desires that erupt into the conscious, disrupting normal psychic functioning. But, by engaging in open fantasies, the creative writer also breaks the same rule, yet, society admires and remunerates him for it! This is achieved because the reader identifies himself, at an emotional and unconscious level, with the experiences recounted and described by the writer. Poetic imagination therefore draws its power from its ability to express some

universal psychological complexes, creating a unique space in which the reader's unconscious gets in touch with an Other, enabling catharsis to take place. Two important rules must be observed for the emotional identification to take place: the writer must disguise fantasies so that they can be experienced in an aesthetic form, and he must ensure that the reader can enjoy day-dreams without shame or guilt (Ibid. 54). Therefore, poetic imagination enables the reader to engage in the socially-unacceptable only because the writer taps into the unconscious without awaking repulsion. Freud identifies the process of aestheticization as a token of compromise and the guarantee offered to the reader, assuring the latter that his or her fantasies will not be violated: "The writer softens the egotistical character of the day-dream by changes and disguises, and he bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is, aesthetic, pleasure of the presentation of his phantasies" (Ibid.). Therefore, in Freudian terms, poetic imagination differs from madness in one respect: while the creative author mediates between the conscious and the unconscious without confusing one for the other, the neurotic fails to return to reality, mistaking "what should be" for "what is". This is tantamount to taking permanent residency in a world of fantasy.

In *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, the kind of madness described by Freud operates within and around the figure of President Léon Mignane. Although the president can be viewed as an artistic construct of Sembene's conceptualization of ludicrous Machiavellianism, Mignane's character is predominantly stylized around psychotic regressions, delusions and hysteria.³⁹ I have already mentioned that Mignane emanates as a dramatic sense of lack. Indeed, the physical absence of the president is never compensated; instead, it is heightened, amplified and repeated throughout the story, culminating in a definitive rejection and exile. Interestingly, Léon Mignane

³⁹ David Murphy's detailed analysis of *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is based on this view of president Mignane as a Machiavellian figure. See *Sembene Ousmane: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction*. Oxford and NJ, 2000.

acts as the agent of behavioral and linguistic aberrations in his cabinet ministers, particularly his two protégés.

No wonder therefore that, when Mam Lat Soukabé feverishly interrogates his colleagues as to the whereabouts of the president, his discourse oscillates between heightened fear, xenophobic dementia, overt solecism and hysteria. Mam Lat's outbursts are calculated to point at the etymological origins of the word hysteria: senseless prattle which borders on the childish. Yet this is the man whose job is to manage the country's finances. The author suggests that the country is in shambles because its leadership is insane. Therefore, if Mignane has encouraged his protégés to fight over puerile fantasies, his absence foregrounds the madness that inhabits the cream of his society, an element which springs straight out of Mam Lat's mouthings. When the latter is informed that the president's car was found in the Cap-Vert region, his vulgarity betrays his hysterical state of mind: "Qu'est-ce qu'il est allé foutre là-bas?" (Vol. I 16). Immediately after this, Mam Lat engages in paranoiac theories: "Disons que c'est la bande de l'escadron noir qui a fait le coup" (Ibid.). Then he loses his mind altogether: "Disons que ce sont les Israéliens qui nous ont fait le coup d'Entebbe à Dakar" (Ibid). By referring to the Entebbe Raid of July 1976, Mam Lat inadvertently identifies Mignane as a suitable target of assassination by foreigners in his own country, comparing him with Idi Amin, one of the worst dictators anywhere. Rather than think rationally, Mam Lat opens his mouth wide, pouring forth obscenities during a somber cabinet meeting, and this is the mark of insanity par excellence.

More importantly, Mam Lat is voicing that which he has always wished for – that is, the death of Léon Mignane, and this further underpins his oedipal tendencies. When the reader learns that the Minister of Finance actually sleeps with Madame, his figure shifts from the enigmatic to the pathetic, paving way to tragic anticipations. Nevertheless, Mam Lat's

adolescent disposition blurs the registers even more: his hysteria makes him comical through and through. He fails to fulfill his ardent dream of taking over power simply because he is a scatterbrain who concentrates too much energy on settling grudges and engaging in scopophilic pursuits; he devours women with a greedy gaze even in the presence of his protector the president. Furthermore, the Minister of Finance is obsessed with his own image, and that is why he is caught unawares when the real coup is carried out by Col. Mané.

Mam Lat's failure comes as no surprise given that, whenever he speaks, he antagonizes his friends and foes alike. This explains the fluidity of the structural organization of the novel which subtly changes to accommodate and indicate general insanity. Therefore, although Mam Lat dominates the discussions in the first chapter, he only ends up alienating himself. He emerges again as a master planner in the eighth chapter – the shortest in the novel, as if to suggest the brevity of Mam Lat's superiority. Here too, he fails to rise to the occasion although he is supposedly addressing the least intelligent inhabitants of Dakar – that is, the so-called businessmen, a few parliamentarians and his own limited circle of cabinet ministers:

Mam Lat Soukabé, maître absolu de leur fortune ou infortune, s'organisait. D'une manière à peine voilée, il aborda la situation, sans faire l'incursion dans l'arbre de vie de Daouda. Il les alerta sur la situation économique... dont le PM était responsable. Il conclut en peignant un marasme pouvant conduire à des émeutes. Effarés, ses interlocuteurs s'enquirent du silence du Vénérable. Il leur répondit qu'il était trop vieux (Vol. I 110).

It is interesting to note that no real dialogue takes place in chapter eight. Instead, the omniscient narrator recounts the events with astonishing rapidity. Yet this is Sembene's novel, a writer

whose work is marked by lengthy dialogues. The reader gets the impression that, even from the narrator's point of view, Mam Lat must be hushed like a naughty child. Evidently, the Minister of Finance cannot fantasize secretly, throwing him into the class of Freudian neurotics. In the quote above – which is actually the eighth chapter in its entirety – Mam Lat has decided to share a Secret of State with people who are not in the government. The fact is that the economic doldrums (the “marasme”) to which Mam Lat is alluding has everything to do with his choices as the holder of the finance docket. The reader knows that he buys the president expensive toys (such as a Boeing), borrows from the IMF with no repayment plan, does nothing to encourage domestic growth, and is oblivious of the country's needs. The Prime Minister may, at least theoretically, be in charge of the day-to-day running of the State, but he has no control over the finances. Mam Lat is lying when he blames Daouda for the country's economic woes. No wonder his audience responds by asking him the one question he cannot answer; the whereabouts of the president. His threadbare response amplifies and repeats the elliptical nature of chapter eight: the reader is faced with an impasse that is embodied by the absence of an old man (“Il leur répondit qu’il était trop vieux”). The Minister of Finance is confused; he has always wished for the end of Mignane's presidency, but when the occasion arises, he yearns for the “father's” return. Foregrounding his weakness, the chapter ends thus: “En lui-même Mam Lat Soukabé souhaitait le retour du Venerable” (Ibid.).

The seeds of discord that Léon Mignane has sown sprout quickly in his absence, generating fear, nightmares and madness. Sembene isolates certain characters during key moments in order to heighten the psychic tension that has gripped the entire cabinet. David-Daouda suffers more than any other person because of his ambiguous position: he has been designated as the heir-apparent, yet Mignane pits him against his nemesis, Mam Lat, a prince

who reminds him constantly that he is a mere griot. In fact, Daouda's mental disorders can be attributed to his proximity to the throne as well as the ever-threatening presence of Mam Lat. In other words, since the president is absent, the presence of his power cannot be ignored. That is why, whenever he is alone in the president's office, Daouda is torn between fascination and panic. The empty throne is a temptation; yet, Daouda can only look at it from a safe distance because of the magical powers that he attributes to it:

Ce trône en bois ékoumé⁴⁰ était sculpté de motifs et des symboles légendaires, appartenant aux divers ethnies du continent. La masse reposait sur quatre pieds qui portait le masque plein de dignité d'un Ibibio⁴¹ barbu ; les accoudoirs étaient renforcés par deux tyi-warra⁴² en ébène, sur le dossier, faces interne et externe, un léopard souplement étendu, les crocs menaçant, se tenait prêt à bondir sur sa proie [...]. Il en était fasciné, comme attiré par une puissance surnaturelle (Vol. I 35).

This surreal representation of Mignane's throne highlights the confusion that reigns throughout the country. As an object of power, the throne is not only ostentatious; it also reveals Mignane's Caligula-like mental disposition. His artistic tastes are driven by a desire to manipulate, to frighten and to create an aura of invincibility. The assemblage of an Ibibio mask and the tyi-warra armrests is ironical in the sense that Mignane does not understand African culture; being too engrossed with his "European identity," he only uses an African outlook to legitimize

⁴⁰ A high-quality hard wood that grows in West African tropical forests, which is used for sculpture among other functions.

⁴¹ The Ibibio people form a large ethnic group that occupies many West African countries.

⁴² The tyi-warra (or chiwara) is a ritualistic headdress that was used by Bamana people during religious festivities. The most distinguishing features of this object are long antelope horns as well as a lengthy penis that dangles all the way to the earth, fertilizing it.

Authénégraficanitus. The throne captures His Excellency's psychological contradictions in their entire splendor; the "peace-loving" Head of State has cannibalistic twists that are emblemized by the leopard's long teeth and its threatening poise. More importantly, in his description of the throne as an object of art, Sembene satirizes Mignane's pan Africanist theorizations as they emanate from his philosophy of Authénégraficanitus, which is nothing but a mask behind which the president hides his egomania.

Therefore, it is no wonder that, when Daouda approaches the empty throne, he recoils at once; he is afraid that His Excellency is somehow spying on him in absentia: "Il était persuadé que quelqu'un l'épiait" (Ibid.). This absence that spies and sees draws its power from witchcraft: "Le trône était marabouté" (36). Built to exude maximum totemic significance, the throne foregrounds Mignane's egocentric approach to power: in his absence, nobody can dare replace him. Furthermore, Daouda is conjoined to His Excellency by yet another secret: earlier in his political career, he had caught his protector anointing himself with safara⁴³, and he is aware that the president believes that he can elongate his own life by ordering the murder of neonates who are stolen from maternity wards. His Excellency's explanation to these insane practices is an interesting one: "L'Afrique est irrationnelle! Ou, alors, sa rationalité surprend le monde moderne... et l'étonne. Ces pratiques, il faut les utiliser... Savoir se protéger de ses adversaires internes" (Ibid.). It is clear that an exotic conception of Africa serves the president in more than one way: as the subject of his poetry, the continent is an innocent mother-figure, but when his power is threatened, it becomes a dark, mysterious space. Mignane's explanation betrays the origins of his madness: his perceived enemies are located not only within his country but also

⁴³ Sembene defines "safara" in a footnote. It is a liquid that is prepared by Islamic communities, which supposedly has protective powers.

deep in his own subconscious: “Savoir se protéger de ses adversaires internes”. The “adversaires internes” are Jungian shadows buried deep in Mignane’s subconscious.

As an agent of madness, Léon Mignane has perfected the art of creating empty spaces in the physical world in order to foster confusion not only among his Young Turks but also in the entire nation. Since he regards himself as an indispensable monarch, the president vacates his office whenever he wishes, and this tempts even the least ambitious of his generals to fill the ensuing vacuum. One of his European military advisors inveigles the Chief of General Staff, Ousmane Mbaye, to take advantage of the void: “La place est vide! C’est le moment de l’occuper” (Vol. II 104). But Mbaye is a non-starter who takes pride in lassitude: the narrator characterizes him as a latifundista, meaning that he is an absentee landlord in a country that can hardly feed itself. In Mignane’s government, the rich and the powerful derive their glory from wastefulness and unproductive ostentation.

Mignane’s empty throne leads to spiritual obscurity, blurring the borders between political realities and personal fantasies. Like memory, the vacant seat emblemizes the presence of an absence, a fact that becomes only too clear when the narrator refers to it over and over in the story. As the heir-apparent, Daouda has to deal with this void on a daily basis, and this exposes him to mental turmoil and total disorientation. During the height of his bravado, the Prime Minister acquires a defiant gaze vis-à-vis the throne: “De nouveau seul, Daouda toisa le trône. Sa peur de tout à l’heure s’était évanouie. La faim, cruellement, le tenaillait, exorcisant en lui la fascination du trône.” (Vol. I 45). True to his spineless nature, Daouda has to be tormented constantly so that one affliction only substitutes another. Indeed, the Prime Minister has the tendency to confuse senses. In this instance, he supplants fear for hunger, and this foregrounds some more serious intellectual and moral deficiencies. That is why, when he is

caught repeating a lie that has become too obvious, Daouda suffers from vertigo: “Flottement vertigineux! [...] De cruels souvenirs. Pourquoi le choix du Vénérable s’était-il porté sur lui?” (Vol. II 108). Suspecting that he is being set up, Daouda transfers his frustrations from human subjects, opting to confront the empty throne:

Après s’être révolté (mentalement), il ôta ses lunettes. La dimension de la salle s’agrandit. A l’extrémité de la longue table, le trône, surélevé, isolé, semblait le narguer. D’instinct, avec l’élan d’un lion, il se dirigea vers lui. A deux pas, son empressement décrut. Les battements de son cœur s’intensifièrent. Il hésitait. [...] Daouda remonta ses lunettes. Le trône semblait être nu. Les détails, les reliefs s’effacèrent. Il posa sa main. Le bois, lisse, poli, l’invitait à s’asseoir. [...] Il récita la Fatihah-al-Kibab et d’autres incantations. Sa formation coranique lui était revenue en mémoire. Il s’assit (Vol. II 108).

By hyperbolizing Daouda’s physical semi-blindness (“il ôta ses lunettes” [...] “(il) remonta ses lunettes”), the narrator derides the general myopia that cripples the body politic. Thus, this particular individual’s ties underpin the commonplace rather than the unique. In other words, there is no originality in Mignane’s cabinet; even ophthalmic illnesses are generalized, and that is why Corrêa’s pupils are damaged to the extent that he cannot see properly. Interestingly, bad memories go hand-in-hand with paranoia and contagious blindness: “De cruels souvenirs. Pourquoi le choix du Vénérable s’était-il porté sur lui?” It is worthy to mention that, in the entire novel, only Daouda is associated with the substantive “exorcism”, meaning that he is indeed preyed upon by mental illness due to his proximity to Mignane’s throne.

The narrator uses contradicting imagery to lampoon the Prime Minister's lopsided pretensions. So, although Daouda has the features of a giraffe, he sprints towards the throne like a lion, only to be slowed down by his natural tendencies to attribute supernatural powers to inanimate objects. If he recites protective verses from the Quran, it is because he believes that the throne is indeed a spiritual entity that can do harm to anyone who dares to replace the president. Even when he gathers enough courage to sit on the throne, he loses the ability to appreciate its symbolic value; instead he deals with it as a living subject, an enemy to be conquered: "Du haut de la place du Vénérable, son regard voilé [...] balaya les deux cotés, de la table. Il ne rencontra que le vide. [...] Il s'adossa sur le panthère" (ibid.). Visual obscurity heightens Daouda's fear for the unknown, and the dominant element of vacuity underscores his spiritual inanity. Thus, unaware that he is only a pathetic graft, Daouda inspires himself from the powers that he associates with the throne to imitate His Excellency's mannerisms, such as repeating the expression "c'est tout." So, when Haidara and Soutapha catch him sitting on the throne, Daouda finds nothing better to tell them other than: "Haidara, c'est tout. [...] C'est tout, Soutapha." (Vol. II 110). This underscores the personality cult that surrounds Mignane's presidency. The narrator continues to amuse himself some more: "Le "c'est tout", prononcé d'une voix inaudible, était entendu. Haidara, pétri de son instinct grégaire, homme de la forêt, avait vu dans cette occupation du trône, la place du Père, une continuité du sacré" (Ibid.). The Father of the Nation has elevated himself to a divinity by using a ridiculous object that scares the most educated members of his cabinet, and this gives him the confidence to abdicate his duties without any fear that anyone can replace him.

One of the most cinematic descriptions in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* is the oneiric episode in which the Prime Minister's panic attacks are dramatized in a phantasmagorical manner. In this

instance, Daouda experiences a nightmare which is populated with threatening images that take the physical figures of His Excellency's empty throne and the cantankerous Mam Lat:

Au lit, Daouda, en proie à des visions, semblait dans les bras de Morphée, par à-coups. La tête du masque du trône, informe, cherchait à l'avaler. En cortège, les *chiwaras*, sans membres, par bonds, dansant, le poursuivaient en poussant des cris. Déguisé en guerrier, peinturluré, armé d'un fusil à lunettes, Mam Lat Soukabé le traquait, tirait entre ses pattes. Il sautait, hurlait" (Vol. I 143/144).

The fact that Daouda "sleeps in the arms of Morpheus" acts as another *dedoublement*: being the god of sleep, Morpheus is also responsible for nightmares and hallucinations, and that is why morphine is named after him.⁴⁴ Thus, Sembene strongly suggests that the secret fantasies (and fears) that Mignane's ministers entertain during the day are not terminated at night; on the contrary, they are reinforced in the form of insomnia, anxiety and/or nightmares. In Daouda's case, the desire to occupy the throne is accompanied by his fear for Mam Lat, who has been deliberately molded to torment him and to frustrate any of his dreams to ascend to the presidency. The scaring mask that wants to swallow him is nothing more than a subconscious conception of the father figure, Léon Mignane. The dismembered wooden warriors who pursue the dreamer are cinematic figures par excellence; they are horror images that are accompanied by Daouda's garishly-made up nemesis, Mam Lat Soukabé. By aiming his weapon between the Prime Minister's legs, Mam Lat is actually sending a double message: if the bullet hits the target,

⁴⁴ Once again, Sembene uses Greek mythology to enrich an African drama. The ancient Greeks designated Morpheus as the leader of the Triplets of Oneirei, the other two being Icelus and Phantasos. Sembene indirectly takes advantage of this Greek nomenclature to subtly indicate a coupling of sleep (or lack of it) and frustrated fantasies.

Daouda will be a castrated man, both politically and physically. This fear of castration is related to the Prime Minister's secret fear of the throne, yet, lurking behind all this drama is the suppressed desire to replace – or kill - the Father of the Nation. Logic would dictate that, for the scion to claim its position as a perfect imitation, the original has to be destroyed. But because Daouda is a coward, he fails to take any real action, forcing his ambitions to be pushed deep into his subconscious from where they emerge as nightmares. In other words, the phantasms that torment him originate from his sheepish acceptance of the appellation David-Daouda, a designation that limits his existence to the permanent waiting posture of a mentally-disturbed heir apparent.

Daouda's healing is initiated by incarceration, an event that the narrator correlates with decamping from unrealistic fantasies: "Emmené à sa cellule, Daouda avait tout simplement dormi, délivré de ses fantasmes" (Vol. II 142). The Prime Minister's extrication from chimera coincides with the debunking of Léon Mignane's ruses. In trying to purge the nation, the army arrests all the high officials who have been associated with political corruption, starting with the president himself. Ironically, it is in detention that the president stages his quick swap from an absent figure to a blustering presence, hastening to regain his delusions and thereby disqualifying himself from any possibility of redemption: "Je suis le Chef de l'Etat, Commandant en Chef de toutes les Forces Armées, Secrétaire Général du Parti..." (Ibid. 143). Talking with psychotic rapidity, Mignane reveals his egomania and estrangement from any of the realities on the ground: "Ils veulent que je signe ma demission [...] Il n'en est pas question [...] Le peuple, les notables vont manifester en ma faveur. En Europe, je suis connu..." (Ibid. 144). Yet, it is precisely at that moment that the people are celebrating his fall, duplicating it metaphorically with the destruction of Faidherbe's monument. At the same time, some of the president's

misguided European friends such as Professor Porgurol cause even more damage by broadcasting nonsense: “Léon est un ami sincère de l’Occident [...] Il était un Blanc d’honneur” (Ibid. 156). It is precisely this “honorary Europeaness” that has alienated the president from the people, causing repulsion. More importantly, Mignane’s claims to kinship with Europe stem from an infantile imagination that culminates in total madness.

The president’s tardy physical entrance into the story not only underscores his expendability as a leader, it also heightens his psychopathic nature. It is no coincidence that he should arrive at the end of events, so that he is reduced to an apparition. After all, he has hitherto operated like a ghost in the minds of men such as Daouda, whose abilities he has impugned throughout his absence. In fact, from a narrative point of view, Mignane’s corporeal presence is a mere afterthought or an explanation of events rather than a reality. In other words, the prolonged absence explains the unnecessary presence; Mignane is dysfunctional because he is scared of being replaceable. That is why he is so paranoid even when he is addressing the only man who truly sympathizes with him, Cheikh Tidiane Sall: “Tu es dans le coup! Avoue-le, avoue-le! [...] On me tue [...]. Tu vas me succéder ... monter sur le trône” (Ibid. 164). By invoking the vacant throne, Mignane foregrounds his principal fear, that is, he does not want to be what he really is: a bad memory, the representative of a rejected and defeated colonial empire. His quest for a double identity has moral and political underpinnings; the father of “authentic Africanness” (Authénégraficanitus) is as European as they come, at least as far as his rogue imagination is concerned: “J’ai été honoré par toutes les distinctions européennes” (Vol. II 165). Incidentally, Mignane cannot talk about Authénégraficanitus without mentioning its “twin” theory of Eurafrique: “[...] je suis l’initiateur de l’Authénégraficanitus...de l’Eurafrique” (Ibid.). During his custody, Mignane is bothered by the purity of the French language; to speak “bad”

French is tantamount to insulting his imaginary Europeanness, the only form of humanity that matters to him. That is why he is so piqued when his captives speak French with a Senegalese accent: “Ecoute-les parler le français. Des analphabètes!” (Ibid.). His mental disorientation is pathetic indeed; to this African head of state, the only measure of cultural cultivation is the ability to speak a colonial language.

President Mignane’s exaggerated exaltation of the Other originates from his puerile affinity for alienating texts and ideologies. In fact, his theories about Euro-Africa are not original at all. Rather, when Mignane claims to be the true founder of the concept of *Eurafrique*, he is being persistently pathological and delusional. Mignane’s “theory” is an overt plagiarism and a blind adherence to Anton Zischka’s Nazi propaganda: “Depuis qu’il avait lu le livre en 1953 [...], il défendait l’esprit du volume. Il s’ébrouait dans la vase de la complimentarité: Eurafrique” (Vol. I 163). When the narrator uses the zoological term “s’ébrouer” (to snort), he is hinting at Mignane’s brutish nature vis-à-vis the European continent whose ideology he aggrandizes. The president has dug his muzzle deep into the mud, inhaling dirt as if it was a drug. His “hybridity”, like Pascal Wellé’s, has put him in a twilight zone in which he attempts to be both a hog and a human being. More importantly, Mignane has adopted a dangerous text whose position is openly imperialist; Zischka believed that racial superiority gave the Germans a right to encroach on other people’s territories, and his conception of Africa as an organic part of Europe stems from this belief. At least Cheikh Tidiane tries to disabuse him: “L’Eurafrique est une association du cheval et de son cavalier. Et nous sommes les montures, Léon” (Vol. I 163). Tidiane realizes that his friend is completely mad when it is too late. The president snaps completely when he recites his theory about “*Afrique Complément de l’Europe*” during his detention. Acting to an imaginary academic audience, Mignane can hide his madness no more:

“Il se laissa aller en étayant son discours de citations latines, germaniques, anglaises et françaises. Dans ses moments de silence, le sourire aux lèvres, son regard coulait d’un angle à un autre” (Ibid.). To complete the performance, the president-turned-clown bows his head at the end of the recital, murmuring “merci” as the crowds in his head applaud. Thus, Sembene represents Mignane as a failed “European” academic and a pathetic, comic figure that happens to be in Africa during the wrong historical moment.

If Mignane’s absence in office creates a prolonged void that impugns the suitability of Daouda, the president’s belated arrival on stage is a fleeting presence that embodies a frustrated agenda. Since nobody sheds a tear during his deportation, Mignane has to convince himself that the country will collapse without him and that, like his “peer” Charles de Gaulle, he can make a come-back to salvage the nation. Failing to wake up from his protracted fantasies, Mignane gives in to a psychotic vision: “Lui seul entendait les tam-tams, les jung-jungs jouer la marche des vainqueurs. Les griots apologistes le chantaient. Les cloches de la cathédrale sonnaient la délivrance du pays [...] Lui seul voyait [...] tous venus l’accueillir, se bousculer autour de lui” (Ibid. 167). By repeating that “only he” can see it so clearly, the narrator isolates Mignane for good, completing his seclusion that must take the form of the ultimate disassociation – exile. Only his long-term friend Cheikh Tidiane Sall can tell what has destroyed the man: “Un homme comme Léon ne pouvait pas quitter la scène sans des ovations et des larmes. Une sortie digne de Shakespeare” (Vol. II 206). Once more, the narrator has limited Mignane to the status of a literary sign, a Shakespearean character whose being is circumscribed within a failed neocolonial experiment just as his “theory” circumscribes African realities within an imperialist conceptualization of geopolitics.

3.2 *Ceddo*: Using the Camera to Historicize Art and Aestheticize Parrhesia

Like *Le Dernier de l'Empire*, *Ceddo* (1976) is a drama of psychosocial isolation, exclusion and occlusion, but, unlike the novel, there is nothing comical about any aspect of the film. On the contrary, *Ceddo* foregrounds the total obliteration of an entire culture and the beginning of prolonged social and economic wreck for a whole race. A wide range of critics have studied the film; David Murphy lauded it as “the most ambitious African film ever made as well as the most creative” (2000 172). This is not surprising given that Sembene uses the camera to condense more than two centuries of history into 120 minutes worth of a spectator’s time.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, *Ceddo*’s director violates almost every verifiable fact, and the result is what Robert Rosenstone would call “constructed history rather than reflected history” (2006 18). That being the case, *Ceddo* is a piece of art that is informed by the need to rethink history on the screen even if the director transgresses the principles of historicity as they may be stipulated by mainstream academy.⁴⁶ Precisely, this is what makes *Ceddo* an innovative historical film per excellence.

Ceddo’s quintessence lies in its artistic subjectivity; it is Sembene’s imagined and imaged reworking of history, a fact that the director admitted during his interview with David Murphy: “Je reconnais que ce n’est peut-être pas historique mais c’est ma version” (2000 235). This can be interpreted to mean that Sembene opted to screen “what might have happened” at a certain period in history, in a small geographical space, rather than anything that can be proven from history books. Sembene gives a very personal and political justification for this: “Vous savez, les Wolof sont l’ethnie la plus bâtard au Senegal. Ils regardent vers l’Occident ou vers la Mecque” (Ibid.). All Sembene’s texts manifest the compulsive desire to sanitize the “bastardly”

⁴⁵ The events that are depicted in the film are grounded in the general period between the second half of the 17th century and the 19th century.

⁴⁶ In *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), Robert Roseinstein underscores cinema’s uniqueness in the sense that, by the nature of its language, the medium belittles historical authenticity, exceeding academic norms about the value of recorded evidence.

attitude to which he is referring; Djia Umrel Bâ voices the same concern in *Le Dernier de l'Empire* when she claims that Jesus should not be confined to Rome, nor should Africans always travel to Mecca to seek the truth. This is Sembene's provocative way of asking Africans to be imaginative, to seek answers from their own environment rather than consume texts from other cultures without thinking why and for whom they were produced in the first place. Djia's words are all the more radical given that, unlike her husband Cheikh Tidiane, she is religious to the core. The point of contention, then, is not about belief or lack of it; rather, it is the relationship between the human subjects and the texts that they consume, and it does not matter whether the texts in question belong to the genre of holy writs or not.

In *Ceddo*, Djia Umrel's purifying discourse is reestablished in the form of the ritual baths that Princess Dior undergoes, in a river, at the beginning of the film and just before she assassinates the Imam. Using such innovations, the cinematic text distinguishes itself by insisting on its language that must be interpreted in its own terms. Through *Ceddo*'s complex cinematic language, the spectator's view is deliberately mediated, and the result is that the film disturbs instead of entertaining. Rosenstone observes that a quest as this should "make history more complex, interrogative and self-conscious, a matter of tough, even unanswerable questions rather than of slick stories" (2006 18). The point I am making is that *Ceddo* does everything to contest, reconstruct and interrogate history in a violent and provocative manner.

Since *Ceddo* is set within the economy of old Wolof society, I would like to comment on the controversial significance of its title. According to Abdoulaye Bara-Diop, the Wolof people were always a stratified unit, and social status was generally genetic, providing little or no

possibility for upward mobility.⁴⁷ The topmost tier of society was occupied by the aristocracy, which was a privileged minority of rulers. Below this, there was a distinct lesser nobility known as the *jambur*, who, together with the peasants (the *baadolo*), formed the broad category of free citizens. Next, in descending order, were the *nyeenyo*, a group that is further subdivided into “those who live by their craft” and “those who live by begging and flattery” (that is, the griots). As I mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, the more prestigious professionals in the *nyeenyo* group included blacksmiths and leatherworkers, and the most inferior *nyeenyo* were the griots. But, as James F. Searing (1988) notes, this social inferiority associated with the *nyeenyo* group was never accompanied by economic abasement. On the contrary, the *nyeenyo* were often wealthy because they were skilled men who monopolized important services that were required by both the aristocracy and the peasantry:

The aristocracy purchased large numbers of weapons, hoes, and other metal goods from blacksmiths, [...], and many leather workers specialized in the manufacture of bridles, saddles, and other aristocratic goods. But it was also a political alliance, and many *nyeenyo* fought for their patrons in time of war or civil strife. Griots were inseparable from the aristocracy they entertained and advised, and whose history they preserved (Ibid. 490).

That does not mean that the aristocracy respected the *nyeenyo* any more than the freemen did. However, if the *baadolo* were socially superior in comparison to the *nyeenyo*, it was because the latter thrived on “laboring for another”, just like the lowest social class, the slaves. Thus, to the

⁴⁷ My discussion of Wolof society is based on: Abdoulaye Bara-Diop, *La Société Wolof: tradition et changement, les systemes d'inégalité et de domination*. Paris: Kathala 1981.

See also: James F. Searing, “Aristocrats, Slaves and Peasants: Power and Dependency in the Wolof States, 1700-1850” in *The International Journal of African Studies*, 21, 3 (1988).

Wolof, belonging to a certain social stratum was a simple matter of social arithmetic (and perception) rather than true economics. But closely related to this was also the element of land tenure: “A free peasant (*baadolo*) was free because he had rights in land, and because he and his family [...] disdained the trades practiced by *nyeenyo* (artisans, entertainers) and slaves” (Searing, 494). So, in the value system of the Wolof, the *baadolo* were more prestigious than the *nyeenyo*, but the former were poor, had no claims to power, could not bear arms, and relied on the *jambur* to represent them in positions of leadership.

Who then were the *ceddo* in Wolof society? Documented records as well as oral history show that, originally, the *ceddo* was a cavalry warrior group that was created in order to protect Wolof communities from the ravages of Mauritanian invaders (Searing 486). Since free citizens (that is, the *jambur* and the *baadolo*) regarded “laboring for another” as a demeaning enterprise, the aristocracy had problems recruiting a military corps from the civilians, and this kept the two social groups at loggerheads permanently. The only alternative was to elevate slaves who became body-guards during times of peace, and who fought during times of war. As the number of these “slave-soldiers” increased, their bond with the aristocracy became stronger, enabling the former to maintain a despotic hold over the proud freemen. This unusual alliance formed a new elite soldiery, the *ceddo*: “The *ceddo* were the most important example of political use of slaves [...] because loyal soldiers were as difficult to recruit as laborers” (Ibid.). Since they had policing duties over the civilians, and because they were employed and maintained by the aristocracy, the *ceddo* naturally became the enemies of the free citizens who regarded them as despicable criminals of low origin. At any rate, to the Wolof, the status of being a slave was a permanent stain that nobody could alter – neither by offering services to the powerful, nor by becoming wealthy. The wedge between the freemen and the *ceddo* was definitive: to the former,

the latter were contemptible slaves, not just because they “labored for another” but, more importantly, by dint of a “birth defect” that was passed from mother to child. The predicament of the freemen in this period is best illustrated by words that Wolof oral history attributes to Kocc Barma, a freeman hero⁴⁸:

Va dire à nos ancêtres qu'aujourd'hui la mort est préférable à la vie.
Va dire à nos aïeux que de leur temps le commandement était entre
les mains d'hommes libres qui connaissaient l'honnêteté et le
devoir; qu'ils sont heureux de jouir du repos de la tombe, car ce
sont des esclaves qui commandent aujourd'hui, ce sont des
esclaves qui exécutent les injustes volontés de leur maître, pour en
être favorisés. Va leur dire qu'il ne manque pas d'hommes qui
désirent le bien-être, mais que ceux qui le procuraient ne sont plus
(Boilat, David. *Esquisses sénégalaises*, 346).

In Sembene's film, this historical state of affairs is turned upside-down: it is the *ceddo* who speak and behave with the dignity of Kocc Barma, which they combine with a military spirit that the freemen did not have. As my quotation on Barma illustrates, the possibility of a union between a freeman and a *ceddo* was untenable by virtue of gleam sociopolitical and historical realities as dictated by Wolof value systems. Thus, the title of the film is a glaring contestation that also serves to proclaim the subjectivity of Sembene's cinematic historiography.

⁴⁸ Kocc Barma (1586-1655) was a *jambur* philosopher who lived in the Wolof kingdom of Kajoor. Renowned for his militant spirit against the despotic aristocracies and their slave-warriors, he is celebrated as the hero of the freemen in 17th century Wolof civilization. Oral tradition attributes thousands of maxims to Kocc Barma, and many modern African philosophers as well as historians have shown an interest in his work. See for example: Diagne, Léon. *Kotch Barma Fall : un philosophe sénégalais du XVII^e siècle*, Dakar, Université de Dakar, 1979.

Within the economy of the film, the word *ceddo* becomes a new signifier that interweaves two strong elements: compunction and reflecting on missed opportunity. The *ceddo* in the film are a powerful, cohesive social group that boasts of robust spiritual values behind which an imaginary sub-culture rallies in the face of adversity. The film never mentions the *baadolo* or the *jambur*; the spectator has to take it for granted that these two fuse with the slave-warriors in order to overcome external threats. When they describe their economic activities, the *ceddo* blend trades that cut across the castes: weaving (a slave's occupation), agriculture (a *baadolo*'s job) and selling slaves (which was carried out by the aristocracy and their police). In other words, *Ceddo* asks the bold nostalgic question: "what if the slaves and the freemen had united in the 17th century?" The "what if" announces a contingency, creating an imaged confluence between the imaginary realm and past reality. *Ceddo* reconstructs the signifiers of pastness by deconstructing existing social perceptions and reorganizing society according to the specificity of the cinematic medium. The film derives its power from poetic and discursive resourcefulness rather than the accuracy of historical detail.

At the beginning of this section, I proposed that *Ceddo* is built up on the principles of systematic isolation and occlusion, which inevitably leads some characters to insanity. Indeed, apart from the *ceddo*, almost all the major characters demonstrate some form of psychopathology: Princess Dior is redeemed from this only because of the purity of her motivations as suggested by her meticulous baths and her regal mien. Otherwise, by assassinating the imam, she would join all those who carry out irrational acts in the film; more specifically, her final act would make her to be just as abominable as the egomaniac cleric.

Together with this, I also observe that such methodical isolation has yet another, more telling effect: apart from correlating character with psychosocial space, the loneliness that

pervades the film hints at a direct dependency between historicity and spectatorship.⁴⁹ After all, like the isolated characters, the spectator is morally severed from any comforting thoughts as he or she deals with the multiple violent actions in the screen, all happening in a rapidity that condenses two hundred years of Wolof history into two hours of spectatorship. Thus, the spectator joins the director in giving a new and radical meaning to events – and this elevates the former to being the co-creator of history. Subtly and systematically, *Ceddo* uses confinement to suspend time and even question its validity: normally, people do not experience temporality in the same way as a recluse, a prisoner or a person in exile. The loneliness in *Ceddo* is a palpable experience that the spectator stares at, through a window, and one is left with the feeling that the events are taking place even as one watches. This is a powerful way of foregrounding the present as the focal point on which the past and future possibilities converge. Moreover, through forced isolation and/or voluntary detachment, the film interrogates temporality, disconnecting the history it re-creates from the dictates of factual chronology. Philip Cohen (2001) aptly captures this point by stating that:

[...] as a historical film *Ceddo* embodies an attitude toward history and its representation [...]. The film, set in an unidentifiable Wolof Kingdom at some indefinite time [...], abstracts itself from absolute chronological precision in order to function as a microcosm of the pre-twentieth century political and cultural forces and contradictions that were the crucible of the modern Senegalese nation (271).

In order to heighten the pairs of identity/alterity upon which the film reposes, Sembene resorts to avant-garde editing, overdetermined casting, color and costume. In this regard, Cohen has made

⁴⁹ In *Change Mummified* (2001), Philip Rosen defines historicity as “the particular interrelations of the mode of historiography and the types of construction of history related by it” (XI). To clarify terms further, I also take Cohen’s definition of historiography: “the text written by the historian (historio-graphy)” (Ibid.).

special emphasis on the violation of the 180-degree principle in relation to theatricalization of discourse in *Ceddo* (*Change Mummified* pages 279-281). The costumes tend to revert to *dedoublement*, giving some scenes a sense of superfluity that cannot be taken for granted. So, in an opening shot, a solitary European priest walks up and down an empty church, reading his Bible. The redundancy of the objects in this shot is an obvious one, but it soon attains an oppositional sense. In the next shot, Wolof women and children are captured in a tracking shot, shouting “Princess Dior has been kidnapped.” This is juxtaposed with the image of Muslim converts praying, led by their imam, a Quran resting before him. The two dominant texts are markers of dissimilarity, and the manner in which they are introduced this early in the film is shocking.

Therefore, two main loci of conflict are captured within the first sequence: the Wolof (whose institutional continuity is represented by Princess Dior Yacine), pitted against two cultural assailants. Thus, the spectator is forcefully forewarned about the nature of the conflict at hand: the confrontation is not going to be just a spiritual one, and this becomes only too clear when a European merchant tags along, always lurking behind the priest like a shadow. The filmic pairing of trafficker with clergyman is repeated over and over, the most memorable moments being when they seat together in Demba Waar’s assemblies. During the colonial days, Africans developed many sayings that summarize such images, and the best one I can think of is the Gikuyu quip: “*Gutiri muthungu na mubea*” (A priest is as white as any colonist). Be that as it may, the two Europeans stand out as a rather voiceless pair (they hardly ever speak, and when they do, they are muted). The spatial arrangement of the screen is crucial in this respect, for the priest’s church is set across the imam’s mosque, and his mute masses are as impressive as the imam’s prayer gatherings.

There is an interesting subtext in all this, namely, the director's contention that Islam is as alien to Senegal as Christianity. In a country where Muslims make up to 94% of the total population, with a 5% Christian minority, Sembene's objection is a remarkable one. David Murphy notes that "there exists a strong Islamic tradition within Senegal which [...] attempts to describe Islam as an indigenous religion [...] or at least as an inevitable outcome of the country's history" (174). The "Islamized" history that emanates from such scholars tends to dissociate their faith with the destruction of pre-colonial African social fabric, insisting instead that Islam was a "civilizing" religion. Concerning that position, Murphy observes: "In this vision, the Wolof would appear to have spent the preceding centuries simply waiting for Islam to come along to relieve them from their social injustices and their multiple false gods" (Ibid.). Thus, the important cultural question that *Ceddo* raises is: who should tell the history of Senegal, based on which texts, and with what motives? The film suggests that the Wolof need to tell their own story, no matter how imperfect it may be. Furthermore, right from the opening sequence, the spectator knows that Sembene refuses to demarcate religious crusades from socioeconomic scrambles, opting instead to treat spiritual proselytizing as a subset of hegemony.

Like *Emitai*, *Ceddo* has two intertwined intrigues. The exterior drama is embodied by the abduction of Princess Dior Yacine by the *ceddo* as an act of protest against forced conversion to Islam. This external conflict is accompanied by an internal disquiet: the *ceddo* are aware that their social fabric is being eroded by the presence of the imam in king Demba's court. The camera approaches the detained princess in a stately manner, giving emphasis to the exteriority of the first, outward conflict. The geographical environment in which the kidnapping takes place is introduced in a very wide shot that shows men on horseback, riding towards a big tree. The camera's movements suggest that the Princess is being led "out there", outdoors and away from

the palace, where she will be held until her father listens to the *ceddo*. In spite of this, the *ceddo* never lose sight of Dior's preeminence: being a princess, she is royalty and, more importantly, she can ascend to the throne. That is why, when the camera finally rests, her captor engages in a ritualized discourse in which he addresses her indirectly through his companion, Fara. In return, the princess uses the same medium to reply: "Fara, tell him..." followed by what appears to be a conventional closing phrase: "That is my will." Interestingly, Fara does not participate in the discussion at all; the princess and her captor are observing discursive norms which require royalty to speak or be spoken to indirectly, through a medium. Yet, as the camera makes clear, Dior is being isolated; as she settles on her hummock, her captor keeps a close watch over her, armed with a bow and arrows.

The *ceddo*'s internal angst is played out in the next sequence where a town-crier beats his drums, announcing king Demba's meeting. The economic woes of the *ceddo* are foregrounded by the fact that those who do not attend the meeting could lose all their possessions and face the possibility of enslavement. Indeed, when they arrive, all the *ceddo* are carrying firewood on their heads as a punishment for insubordination. This physical burden soon attains a spiritual turn: a convert announces that the *ceddo* will burn in hell for refusing to convert to Islam. The imam's presence is emphasized by mid shots that give eminence to the beads that he is rolling as well as his Quran. In a way, there are two centers of power in the territory; the imam has more followers than the king, who happens to be a Muslim himself. The imam embodies the monopoly of spiritual power, and his text soon becomes the only acceptable cultural reference in Demba's watch. The camera's hostility towards the monarch can therefore be understood as the director's comment about an unhealthy collusion between political power and an invading

culture. Since the king has acquiesced to a foreign cultural invasion, he is slowly delegitimized by the imam and his converts.

Only the *ceddo* stand against the imam; indeed, the beads that characterize their attire mimic and oppose the cleric's rosary. The visual import of this *dedoublement* is a powerful one: if the *ceddo*'s beads represent something undesirable, why should the imam's pellets be different? This doubling also suggests that cultural objects do not have any meaning other than that which is assigned to them by human subjects. In order to demarcate the spiritual space between them and the intruders, the *ceddo* have their own logotype, the *samp*, which always precedes them or whichever messages they send outside. The *samp* communicates through the register of presence/absence: when Diogomay sticks it into the ground, it becomes a sign of resistance; the *ceddo* have a right to speak because they have a culture, meaning that if and when the *samp* is destroyed, then they must agree to be mere listeners. Whenever a messenger approaches princess Dior's captor, his companion reads the former's intention relative to the *samp*. The absence of the *samp* is a declaration of war, a refusal to negotiate. Therefore, when the man announces: "Someone is approaching on horseback. He is not bearing the *samp*", the *ceddo* warrior prepares for war without any further discussion. The *samp* is the most ubiquitous and energizing cultural signifier in the film, and that is probably the reason why it keeps on moving from one corner of the screen to the other during different times. Unlike the other texts that operate within a limited sphere (the Bible never leaves the church; the Quran is monopolized by the imam), the *samp* moves from the *ceddo*'s residences to king Demba's court and even as far as "out there" where Dior Yacine is detained. Sembene even consecrates an entire tracking shot to the *samp*, where, on its own accord, it strides across the screen so that the spectator can see the female features on its face and its sharp pointed breasts. If the male-dominated Islam will

conquer the Wolof, it will have to wipe out any ties to a matrilineal system; the *samp* will not go down without a fight. The *samp* represents the *ceddo*'s social cohesion, but the camera gives a caveat: this cohesion is relative to their existing values and customs.

Like *Emitai*'s Djimeko, Diogomaye is the parrhesiastes of choice in *ceddo*. His status of community spokesman emanates from a strong moral standing; although the king has accorded him the special privilege of not having to carry firewood on his head, Diogomaye rejects such personal favors, opting instead to bear the burden just like his suffering colleagues. This valorizes the ethos of the *ceddo* in the same way as the *tirailleurs*' in *Camp de Thiaroye*: here is a resolute group that recognizes personal sacrifice and discipline as opposed to a self-seeking mentality. Diogomaye engages king Demba in a rational discussion about his subjects' age-honored rights to conserve their customs, but the king's power of reason has already been eroded and subordinated to the will of the imam. That is why the monarch decrees that the firewood on the *ceddo*'s heads will be used to light the imam's quarters at night. The metaphorical essence of this pronouncement is fortified by the "firewood sequence" which is made up of rapid shots showing the *ceddo* throwing down their firewood so that it falls like rain, filling the entire screen. This is a prevision of the fire that will later destroy the *ceddo*'s homes at the behest of the imam. More importantly, the camera gives a strong warning to king Demba; by bending to the imam's whims, the monarch is playing with fire. The theme of arson was already introduced by Jaraaf at the beginning of the meeting when he prophesied that "the *ceddo* will burn in hell" and the presence of a heap of dry wood all over the screen shifts the threat to a more immediate one. The visual impact of this amassment of an inflammable material is two-fold: it is an ominous sign to king Demba's reign, and it equally suggests that the monarch is actually providing his enemy with the means to "burn" his kingdom.

Diogomaye' status as a truth-speaker is unquestionable; after rebuffing the concessions that the king offers him, he sticks out his neck to protest falsehoods, and this earns him more and more prominence in the camera's eye. After the deaths of Biram and Saxewaar, Diogomay confronts the king once more. In this instance, he is captured in medium long shots that quickly give way to a prestigious medium shot in which he is looking directly into the eyes of Demba, proclaiming the unthinkable: "Our country is torn between two camps. Two bodies lie between those camps." To this assertion, the imam does not hesitate to voice his own oversimplification which is, to say the least, a very dangerous one: to him, the *ceddo*'s lives "are not worth horse dung." In a way, the entire film seeks to reveal and deconstruct the imam's reductionist vision of humanity in relation to the cultural artifacts (or texts) that it produces and consumes. The camera gives Diogomay the prerogative to voice *Ceddo*'s biggest interrogative: "Is religion worth a man's life?" The imam's reply sums up his pathological misinterpretation of texts and cultural circumstances: he insists that the Quran is the only source of the truth, the reason being that it is written in "the beautiful language of the prophet Mohamed." Then, the imam does what the camera has been preparing the spectator for all along; he exonerates himself from recognizing Demba's leadership, proclaiming that he only lives for Allah. To the king's shock and disbelief, the imam reveals his own political ambitions: "Moslem power is a gift from Allah." With this assertion, the imam has openly disengaged his followers from any civil order that may emanate from Demba's leadership. The king's court is all but officially dissolved. Unsurprisingly, the *ceddo* are the first to realize the import of this situation, and that is why they leave immediately, leaving their *samp* behind. Religion and political power have fused in the sleeve of a single cleric.

From this moment onwards, king Demba's clique undergoes a systematic cleavage, always portraying mental fitfulness. The camera's subjective stance is clear about this state of affairs: the political fragmentation is initiated and exacerbated by bad personal decisions within the aristocracy. In fact, the camera alludes to the fractures that characterize the court right from the beginning of the film, where they are explained in terms of Demba's mental sluggishness and the aristocracy's arrogance. Two princes get themselves killed unnecessarily; Saxewaar opens the bloodletting when he goes after Dior's captor in a blind huff. When the *ceddo* warrior shoots him, Saxewaar is brought back to the village, and this fills prince Biram with raw rage. He too sets off, armed with his rifle but no sense, and the *ceddo* guerilla kills him with a single arrow shot. Interestingly, the camera does not show the king's reaction to this loss. Instead, Demba is left in the shadows as his courtiers conspire to abandon him: "The Toub dynasty has no more male heirs. [...] We must welcome Islam while maintaining our customs." The courtiers are evidently blind and deaf: the imam has declared that his cult cannot co-exist with other customs. Demba's government has abdicated, isolating the king for good. In one of the most revealing shots in the film, the king's nephew Madior is captured in a crouching position, observing the weakened king Demba. The only sound that can be heard is that of houseflies buzzing around the throne, as if the king was already dead and rotting.

Madior's uppity outlook stems from his claims to knowledge of culture, but this is only because the patriarchal system that the imam establishes would block him from power. It should therefore come as no surprise that he should present an aggressive resistance to the imam's machinations right from the standpoint of the privileged aristocracy. By representing Madior (who is a prince by birth) as a sympathizer to the *ceddo*'s cause, the camera heightens the subjectivity of the historiography that it proposes. For one, Madior understands the cultural-

political quagmire of the kingdom as clearly as the *ceddo*, but he never attempts to join forces with them. Yet, during the most heated session of the court, he distinguishes himself as an outsider; his choice of attire is definitely calculated to separate him from the other courtiers, who have all accepted Islamic gowns. The reasons for this are very personal: Madior has become a bitter offshoot of the aristocracy because he is the first victim of the imam's encroachment on the monarchy. Under the traditional matriarchal system of succession, Medior would be the heir apparent because the throne should be handed down from uncle to nephew. Demba's mistake is to accept the imam's patriarchal decree that destroys the balance between wolof customs and religious belief once and for all. For, according to the imam, Islam has no room for matrilineal considerations; it is a male-dominated religion. Madior therefore has good reasons to view the king as "a goat that has been devoured by a hyena," which makes the imam a ruthless predator. It also gives Madior the possibility to function in the margins; he carries the *samp*, just like a *ceddo*, but he has the right to roam freely, subjecting everyone to his gaze. He stylizes himself as a survivor during vicissitudes: "The wind that breaks the baobab tree only bends the millet stalk." Demba's kingdom will fall, but Madior intends to survive. This resolve to "survive the wind" of Islamization motivates Madior to scrutinize all the rituals surrounding the three religions in the land.

The physical and psychological itinerancy of Madior positions him in the register of nostalgia – which is by definition a consequence rather than an event, and this is largely due to the fact that he presupposes that linear descent is the only route to power. Due to the shifting nature of his era, he is confronted by a new truth – which simply states that a man of dubious origin can take advantage of religious beliefs to change the rules and alter an entire society's history for good. But, much as he may regard himself as "a millet stalk that cannot be destroyed

by a wind”, Madior is inflexible as far as his claims to the throne are concerned. The contradictions surrounding his character are represented as a kind of madness, which is dramatized during his encounter with the Roman Catholic priest. That particular instance heightens the feverish aura of the film, allowing the director to inscribe some problematic commentaries into the distraught screen. The priest is the loneliest character in the film; he stands out as an introvert who does not even try to reach out to the only other European in the community, the merchant. Sembene chooses the priest’s vestments with a lot of detail, dressing him in a white cassock at all times, to which he adds an impressive chasuble when he celebrates a rather mute mass, assisted by his single convert. Madior is attracted by the quiet ritual, which he observes from a crouching position. Mistaking this to be an intention to convert, the priest approaches him, lifts his face upwards and experiences what appears to be a vision.

Taking a worm’s eye-view, the camera follows the priest’s gaze which rests not in the glories of the heavens but on the ceiling of a Catholic cathedral, complete with the figures of angels. The spectator may conclude that the priest’s mind has been transported back to Europe, where there is a long tradition of cathedral-building. But the intercut is followed by another, more grandiose shot of a big African congregation with many black nuns. The soundtrack plays an African Catholic celebratory song. Then the vision takes a new twist as Madior features as a bishop, blessing the Eucharist and serving it to the faithful. As the African choir sings, Madior’s bishopric is celebrated in a cutaway that shows his black hand with a religious ring. Suddenly, the lens captures the European priest resting in a coffin, and bishop Madior is officiating his funeral mass. As if that is not enough, the camera shifts to the altar where the young African bishop bears a most unusual scepter; it has a crucifix and a *ceddo’s samp*, all in one! All this

takes place at lightning speed before the camera reverts back to the desolate church. As the priest contemplates the paucity of his current means, Madior leaves at once.

In *Change Mummified*, Philip Cohen has read this sequence as a *false flash-forward* (284) which he interprets as “a historical option lost” (Ibid. 285). According to Cohen, the “falsity” of the sequence rests in Islam’s predominance in Senegal as opposed to the glorious presence of Christianity in the priest’s dream. However, I propose an alternative interpretation of the sequence which puts two factors into consideration. The first factor is that, much as Senegal is predominantly Muslim, there has been a stable Catholic population for many years which mainly took root in mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of the French. In fact, Senegal’s first president Léopold Sédar Senghor was a practicing Catholic as are many other people, mainly in the urban areas. The second factor is closely related to Sembene’s artistic disposition vis-à-vis religious minorities. Through his poetic imagination, Sembene tends to render justice to the subjugated, and he is particularly inclined to give voice to minorities. So, in *Faat Kiné*, the liberal-Muslim protagonist entertains a very healthy relationship with a refined Catholic gentleman, Jean. To Sembene, the co-existence of religious faiths is a powerful yardstick for measuring a society’s maturity and democratization.

The priest’s vision is problematic in a number of ways. First, he seems to be doing two things simultaneously: remembering and prophesying. The spectator can assume that, finding himself in isolation with only one convert, the priest can only remember his own country where there are real cathedrals. But this memory propels him forwards to a future in which he envisions the fruits of his work in the form of many African converts. The problem is this: how could he have foreseen a 20th century African mass so vividly? Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church has not always been as progressive as the camera suggests. The development of an

African clergy is a relatively recent occurrence in the Church, as is the use of African languages in liturgy. Sembene is deliberately using editing to bring together (and comment on) two unrelated experiences. The director is playing with signs: he is subjecting the spectator to the doubling of cinematic and linguistic signs. At the same time, he is using the camera to theorize about the nature of the cinematic experience. Thus, in the enigmatic dream, both the priest and the spectator are seeing things on different planes. In one hand, the experience of seeing subsumes and supersedes a reality which scares the priest out of his wits: death. When he looks at Madior, he sees his own death, but he must also imagine his pastoral success in Africa. Every preacher engages in this kind of visionary imagination because it overcomes more transitory preoccupations. Imagination is therefore substituting and enriching the priest's memory; after all, as Edward Casey observes, imagining is always intentional (38). In *Ceddo*, the new reality presented in the screen is one in which, through memory, the present, the past and the future blend. Madior's bishopric scepter underpins Sembene's own vision of an all-inclusive and multi-cultural Senegal.

In *Ceddo*, signifiers of the Self always function within the realm of psycho-social sanity, and social acts follow the principle of isolation as it operates throughout the film. Therefore, Madior's decision to reject Islam stems from a perceived injustice as it is embodied by the imam's usurpation of existing institutions. The Self cannot exist without a social framework, and that is precisely what is at stake in *Ceddo*. When Madior proclaims that the imam is the real danger that waits to strike the kingdom, he is excluded from the court at once. It is Jaraaf who excommunicates him: "The blood in your veins makes you one of our own, but your tongue excludes you." By using the "you" in opposition to "us," Jaraaf (the griot) is speaking on behalf of the aristocracy although he or his ancestors have never really been part of it. But Madior

understands that, once the norms of the kingdom are destroyed, language as a performative act will shift, making the office of the griot as amorphous as the throne it is supposed to serve. That is why Madior transgresses the rule that requires him to speak to Demba through his griot, opting instead to engage in a direct ranting: “You had authority over me as long as our customs were respected.” Coming from a prince, this pronouncement is self-abnegating: Madior cannot be a prince as long as he operates outside of the family unit that defines him in relation to the throne.

If Madior becomes a social nomad as a result of his fallout with the Islamized aristocracy, the *ceddo* seek survival from the opposite direction: that is, integrating Islam as a stratagem against annihilation. In this regard, the *ceddo*’s last meeting foregrounds their values as a democratic sub-culture: rational deliberations are the core of their political discourse, and personal decisions have a communal dimension. The meeting arrives at the conclusion that the *ceddo* have been politically isolated with the aim of disenfranchising them: “We are no longer represented in the council.” This desperation emanates from the fact that the king has abducted his duty to defend the citizenry. What is particularly interesting is that the *ceddo* appropriate the voice of the *baadolo* (the free peasantry) who could not defend themselves because they had no weapons. But this is immediately contravened in a single sentence which destabilizes social stratification: “We have no slaves to trade for weapons.” The decision to convert is arrived at through consensus: the bowl full of sticks represents *ceddo* political harmony and democracy. Within the bowl, every household has one vote, which is a single stick.

The baptism of the *ceddo*’s is preceded and subjugated to two important scenes: the democratic meeting I have just outlined, and the scene in which the imam declares jihad against the infidels. Since chronology matters very little in *Ceddo*, it is not clear whether the two scenes take place simultaneously, or whether there is a lapse of any sort between them. What is

pertinent is the fact that the imam's decree is superfluous because the *ceddo* have decided to convert peacefully. This explains why the film does not even tell exactly when the jihad is declared; the only point of significance is that the cleric waits until dusk before ordering his followers to arm themselves and torch the *ceddo*'s homes, suggesting that he is a psychotic schemer who operates in the dark. The imam's proselyting mission plays out as a campaign of violence, which, in spiritual terms, makes it a hollow victory.

The soundtrack problematizes the *ceddo*'s quest for cultural survival in the face of religious persecution: as their houses go up in flames, an African American gospel artist sings "I Will Make It Home Some Day." Apart from framing the Islamic onslaught within the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the song inscribes the struggles of the African American community within a wider African history that spans across oceans and centuries. The same music is used earlier on in the film, in the scene where the European merchant brands a young girl with red-hot metal, preparing her for definitive exile. The searing of flesh mingles with the extradiegetic proclamation "I Will Make It Home Some Day" just as the crackling of frames does during the jihad. The fire goes out of control, consuming the whole screen until there is nothing left to burn. As dawn approaches, the camera takes a worm's eye-view to show a deceptively blue sky which brings neither peace nor respite. Instead, vultures circumnavigate the desolate village.

It is against this backdrop that the *ceddo* present themselves to the imam for the ritual that should, according to the cleric, save them from a wicked culture. Since the *ceddo* have already made their point about Islamization, they now act as a very calm group of men, women and children that willfully get initiated into the fold of the man who just destroyed their homes. Even as the ceremony takes place, a messenger is sent to Princess Dior Yacine. She learns that the king "has died of a snake-bite," which metaphorically warns her that the psychotic imam has

assassinated Demba. That being the case, the baptism that is simultaneously taking place emerges as a poisonous rite, a fact that is emphasized through a *dedoublement* of signification: every *ceddo* is shaved clean before being presented in front of the imam who places his beads upon their heads. Now, one of the *ceddo*'s sins is to identify themselves with a certain kind of beads, which are destroyed during the shaving. Yet, in a brief cut-in, one of the *ceddo*'s is able to recover some of his beads as they fall from his head, then he hides them from view. This "bead that survives" could be an indication that the *ceddo* will not forget their culture completely just because they have accepted new names. The film would never have been made had that been the case. Indeed, the director acts as one of the *ceddo* in the film. As one of the actors, Sembene presents himself during Demba's first meeting, carrying firewood on his head like the other *ceddo*'s; he represents a household during the *ceddo*'s last meeting, where he votes for peaceful Islamization; and he undergoes baptism with the rest. Even the name Ousmane is given to one of the converts during the ceremony. All these are indicators of auto-referentiality in *Ceddo*: the director defines himself as a witness, which justifies his resolve to interrogate the history behind his Islamic name.

With the death of the king and the conversion of the *ceddo*, the imam quickly manifests his true intentions by appropriating two important markers of authority: he sits under king Demba's umbrella, and he starts talking through a griot. In fact, Jaraaf switches bosses upon the death of the king when he addresses the imam: "May your rule endure forever." This in itself illustrates the fickleness of king Demba's courtiers but, more importantly, it reveals that Jaraaf understands the imam's ambitions. That is probably why he is stripped of his duties at once; the imam chooses a new praise-singer from his own inner circle. Additionally, the imam publicly makes political decisions. Since the death of Saxewaar and Biram, the aristocracy has voiced its

concern that the imam may forcefully marry the Princess in order to legitimize his political office and smother the matrilineal-based inheritance for good. When the imam sends for Dior Yacine, the aristocracy's fears prove to be well-founded. The Princess' journey on horseback is juxtaposed with the baptism of the *ceddo*, which signifies the imam's unquestioned preeminence. Upon her arrival, Dior shoots the imam at once, throwing the Islamic community off-balance. As her face dissolves into the freeze that ends the film, the spectator is left with more questions than answers.

Since Senegal is a predominantly Muslim country, the assassination of the imam only renders poetic justice to the story in *Ceddo*. While the conversion of the *ceddo* is grounded on clear, rational political choices, Princess Dior's act appears to be laudable but not realistic. Since Islam has already taken root in the society, the killing of the imam wouldn't restore the culture he has destroyed; the burning of the *samp* speaks volumes about this reality. A more important fact is that Dior does not even approach the throne, and so she is unlikely to replace her father as the new monarch. Indeed, there is no indication that Dior ever existed as a historical figure. The kidnapping of the Princess at the beginning of the story precipitates the death of two princes and the destruction of her father's government, but in the end, her presence does nothing to restore the monarchy. Therefore, like the rest of *Ceddo*, this denouement is an artist's imaged and imagined construction of a kind of history – cinematic history, which does not rely on the accuracy of written historical texts.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to study the relationship between history and memory in five texts among which are: Sembene's longest novel (*Le Dernier de l'Empire*), a short story (*Vehi-Ciosane*) and three films (*Camp de Thiaroye*, *Emitai* and *Ceddo*). In my introduction, I observed that Sembene's art tends to subvert any attempts at silencing memories. Actually, the dissertation reveals that his art goes even further to serve as an important repository of personal as well as collective memory. However, this artistic memory has little to do with the original events (be it the slave trade, colonization, struggles for freedom or the establishment of emasculated leaderships); rather, the texts that I have studied represent the past as an artistic basis for reconstructing it and imagining richer future possibilities. Thus, the memory that interests Sembene has two important elements: it is thought-provoking (hence the lengthy descriptions in his prose and the disturbing images that linger on his screen), and it is a futuristic entity. Furthermore, Sembene is not interested in reviving bitter memories in order to agitate his readers/spectators; rather, his audience is invited to discuss issues, to interrogate the past in question and to analyze issues based on the potency of what those issues can contribute in making better and productive selves. I have given a lot of attention to this relationship between this Self and the text(s) that it produces (or consumes).

Throughout the dissertation, I have observed the general principle of paying attention to Sembene's own theory (as expounded in *Le Dernier de l'Empire*), proposing that this should give the reader/spectator a good orientation towards other theorists who may shed light on his

art. Following this model, I will give an example here to illustrate the point I was making in the paragraph above. After witnessing the coup and the deportation of President Mignane, Cheikh Tidiane Sall gets into an argument with the Chief Prosecutor Ndaw. Tidiane oscillates between overtly justifying the coup and interrogating its value in a democracy. Taking advantage of this political context, Tidiane gets carried away into an outburst in which he wonders whether African countries are real nations or mere collections of amorphous (and untenable) entities. For this reason, Ndaw voices his fears that Tidiane may be secretly supporting the coup. That is when Tidiane invokes the future, saying: “Non, non. Je réfléchissais sur l’avenir. Voir comment utiliser ce cataclysme.” I read this as Sembene’s invitation to his African reader/spectator to wrestle memory from its pastness and forge a future (or a possibility) from it. For that reason, the denouement of *Le Dernier de l’Empire* – as all others in this study - can be interpreted as a liminal space, so that, rather than signifying an ending or closure, a new beginning and a new discussion announces its presencing. Homi Bhabha (1994) terms such presencing as “exceeding the barrier or boundary”:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent of in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (7).

There is actually nothing nostalgic about the past that Sembene invokes in his prose and cinema; on the contrary, there is a strong presence of soreness in matters regarding the slave-trade, colonialization and violent proselytization of African peoples. However, Sembene departs from

these memories in order to give memory a futurity. I read this as an act of empowering the reader/spectator to contribute to the meaning of the text, and also to mold his or her own destiny.

Although the texts that I have studied bear the imprints of pastness, I emphasize that the action of remembering is totally anchored in the present: “remembering is itself essential to what is happening, part of every action, here as well as elsewhere; remembering is always now” (Edward Casey xii). Since the spectator of, say, *Ceddo*, is confronted with living images *now* (meaning, at the moment he or she watches the film), the events whose memories are invoked differ from the spectator’s experience of them. So, if the ideal spectator of Sembene’s films are Senegalese (because they can understand the linguistic nuances better, or recognize the landscapes on the screen), most of them are also likely to be Muslims (94% of Senegalese practice Islam). The pastness in *Ceddo* revolves around the forceful proselytization of Senegalese communities *at a certain time in history*, but the present situation reveals that there is an important population of Roman Catholics and Protestants who co-exist quite harmoniously with the Muslim majority. Therefore, if (to quote Casey) “remembering is essential to what is happening now”, the Senegalese spectator of *Ceddo* is not being asked to rebel against Islam, or revert to the so-called “traditional way of life” (a statement that makes no sense, since all ways of life are indeed traditions). That is why, in the introduction to this study, I proposed that the violent acts in *Ceddo* are intended to serve as a warning against religious hegemony and not an attack on Islam or any other religion. The same argument holds in the analyses of all the texts in this study. Thus, if *Emitai* reconstructs the memories of the conscription of the tirailleurs, the interruption (and destruction) of Diola industries in the wake of colonization, and the specific events that took place in Effok in 1942, the director refuses to make innocent victims of the Diola. Instead, he shoots the film in Diola-land and in Diola language the better to interrogate

the validity of the way the Diola's forefathers responded to those events. As they watch the heated dialogues between the elders in the shrine, they are invited to relive part of their own pastness, to "remember now". *Emitai* and *Camp de Thiaroye* are united by the pathos of Sergeant Aloyse Diatta, a man who was born in Effok and who lost both of his parents in the bloodbath of 1942. *Camp de Thiaroye* was received with a lot of hostility by French officials in Dakar because of the troubling nature of the events it recounts – events which evoke the criminal nature of the colonial enterprise and the "thingification" of the colonized. But Sembene makes it clear that the film is not meant to accuse or condemn; rather, it is a piece of art which uses particular historical events as a beginning point. What it does challenge, though, is the amnesic vacuity that the relationship between France and her former colonies may promote. This intentionality serves as a powerful leitmotif of Sembene's imagination and the art that springs from it.

This dissertation postulates that Sembene views remembering as an active reconstruction, which is not synonymous to mere recording, storing and/or retrieving. In the five texts that I have studied, memory emerges as a deliberate act of discerning, interpreting and creating. That makes artistic memory a selective enterprise. Therefore, to Léon Mignane's devaluation of memory, Cheikh Tidiane Sall responds by actively remembering his life from the year 1919 onwards. Since the President and Sall are conjoined by the hip through their long surjourn in France, their studies abroad and their senior positions in Senegalese government, the reader can not fail to notice the collision that takes place between their orientations, all because, while one seeks to forget, the other counters this by deciding to write an autobiography. Therefore, like the pair Tidiane/Mignane, memory and writing are conjoined enterprises whose prerequisite is to have the ability to look, to discern. In Sembene's aesthetics of memory, an averted gaze is a

violation to the eye – hence the seeing subject “I”. This relationship between memory, history, textuality and subjectivity forms the core of the complex aesthetic I have studied in his texts.

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