Sarah Jilani (2021): "They Drew an Entire People after Them", *Interventions*, DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2021.1892515

"They Drew an Entire People after Them": Subjectivity and Arrested Decolonisation in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*

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Abstract: Ousmane Sembène's 1975 film *Xala*, a searing satire about the post-independence Senegalese elite, has received wide scholarly attention for its critique of crony capitalism masquerading as African socialism. This article seeks to examine how *Xala* approaches the under-studied question of subjectivity under these circumstances, seeking to trace the film's key concern with the effects of such neocolonial conditions upon the wider populace. Proposing that the central allegory of Sembène's film – the native elite as complicit against and/or unable to spearhead national decolonisation – is not the final but the starting point of the analysis it offers of the relationship between subjectivity and arrested decolonisation, this article argues that *Xala* centres land dispossession as the primary issue in post-independence Senegal both because it sabotages the redistributive promise of independence, and because it strips people of the material moorings of their subjectivities. In three interconnected discussions of sartorial self-fashioning, the politics of La Francophonie, and the kinship networks broken by land theft, I propose that *Xala* is an exposé of how structures and subjectivities are inseparably bound under conditions of neocolonialism, with the futurity of national decolonisation dependent on transforming both.

Keywords: Ousmane Sembène, African film, Xala, subjectivity, postcolonial studies, decolonisation

In 1995, Ousmane Sembène is asked about the function of beggars in his films *Xala* (1975) and *Guelwaar* (1994). He answers by raising several lines of inquiry, including: the rise of begging in Senegalese cities as an expression of the country's socio-economic situation; the fate of nations that raise begging from other nations to state policy; and begging as utilised in West African ritual for symbolic atonement and social rehabilitation."Everything holds together, but it is up to you to analyse it and make up your own mind on it," he concludes (1995, 175). Enriched and strengthened by this ability to hold contradiction, Sembène's cinematic practice sustains what Sam Okoth Opondo identifies as "the ambiguity and multiplicity of African times and lived experiences" (2015, 41), while centring Africans as agents of their own representation. Sembène's forth feature-length film *Xala* (1975), which addresses the betrayal of the social, political and economic promises of independence within the space of a decade, is exemplary of the above attributes in its attempts to diagnose why, and how, these promises did not bear fruit. Although adapted within just a year, Sembène's film is departure enough from his novel for Josef Gugler and Omar Cherif Diop to accurately stress that the former addresses a mass audience with its "clear shift in emphasis [from]

denouncing the parasitic Senegalese bourgeoisie to exposing the neocolonial political regime" (1998, 147).

Now of canonical status in the study of African cinema, this satirical story about a businessman who gets the *xala* (the curse of impotence) before he can consummate his third marriage has been discussed extensively for the ways in which it dramatises Senegal's post-independence neocolonial conditions, through allegories that foreground "class, racial and sexual conflicts" (Landy 1984, 32). *Xala* takes up these interrogations of both the means and social relations of production as it unfolds the tension between El-Hadji's outward display of potency and his actual impotence. As he grows obsessed with his ailment, paying several *marabouts* extortionate amounts for a cure, the financial, psychological and sexual scaffolding of El-Hadji's position are stripped away. As such, *Xala* has been interpreted with close reference to Frantz Fanon's searing exposé of African elites as the West's business agent (Guneratne and Dissanayake 2003; Mushengyezi 2004; Kilian 2010; Lindo 2010). Drawing from Fredric Jameson (1986) and Roy Armes (1987), this body of scholarship has insightfully traced how El-Hadji's behaviour is dictated by a class "whose meaning and purpose are determined by forces apparently coming from the outside" (Sorensen 2010, 223), via drawing "a relation between the private and public: stories of individualised characters or configurations figure a broader public, collective context whose signified is national" (Rosen 1996, 35).[1]

Broadly agreeing with materialist analyses of *Xala* as an example of "cinéma engagé" as adapted to the particular context of Sembène's practice and stated aims as a filmmaker (Gadjigo 2008; Landy 1984; Opondo 2015), in this essay I seek to draw attention to Sembène's relatively under-explored but related attention to the relationship between these aforementioned neocolonial conditions and the formation of subjectivities. *Xala* is deeply interested in subjectivities under the influence of the contradictions of post-independence life – in how, in other words, those neocolonial material conditions that scholarship has traced within the film's satirical and allegorical contents come to inform consciousness. We know that one of Sembène's core concerns in his early cinematic *oeuvre* – from *La Noire De…* (1966) and *Mandabi* (1968) to *Xala* – is that of Africa's "arrested decolonisation" (Jeyifo 1990). But the inseparable, albeit varied, relationship between this structural problem and the problem of the effects these structural injustices have upon the interiorities of West Africans of all classes is woven into this critique in *Xala,* not as addendum but as a psycho-social force that results from, and in turn effects, the arrest of decolonisation in Senegal. *Xala's* critique of this relationship between French West Africa's economic situation and

[1] Josef Gugler and Omar Sherif Diop (1998) devoted especial attention to this within their historicist examinations of African cinema.

its effects at the level of subjectivities is crucial, I will argue, to understanding (in addition to and beyond the existing scholarship) Sembène's film's treatment of subjectivity as ever more important terrain for neocolonial capitalism's designs upon the African continent. Continuing apace from the 1980's onwards via the separation of Africans from the products of their labours, neocolonialism's manufactured separation between the individual-subjective and the collective-social, *Xala* illustrates through its protagonist, will depend ever more on conflating purchasing power with ontological security.[2]

As El-Hadji's class enacts mere spectacles of nationalist resistance to legitimise their lifestyles of mimicry, they are also transforming the former's demand for economic self-determination into the freedom of consumer choice. They, in Fanon's words, are not only "set in the mould of the former mother country" themselves, but also "hasten to send the people back to their caves" after independence because their class has not taken the "primordial task" of raising popular political consciousness is "to heart" (2001, 145). As Fanon's psycho-social terminology implies, the threat is not that this class has hinged the constitution of their subjectivities upon consumer capitalism, but that the populace is internalising what they are seeing and are therefore on the receiving end of a combination of distraction and deliberate prevention from their noting the actual crime at hand – that of collective wealth theft by the post-independence elite. This is revealed to us at the end of the film by Gorgui, the leader of the beggars. Examining Sembène's approach to self-fashioning and language as the film builds up to the reveal of land theft as what ultimately sets in motion, prior to the temporality of the narrative itself, El-Hadji's process of de-subjectification, I will seek to demonstrate how the film arrives at social embeddedness and social responsibility as powerful means of constituting subjectivities that challenge the post-independence order.

Filming itself took place within the context of the neocolonial state of affairs it satirises, a context at once a powerful motivator for Sembène and a constant practical challenge. France's anxieties around the power of film in shaping public opinion was evident in decrees such as Le Décret Laval, which sought to "control the content of films that were shot in Africa and to minimise the creative roles played by Africans in the making of films" (Diawara 1992, 23). Despite this and more hurdles, cinema's pedagogical and ideological value, along with its close affinity to traditional African idioms of communication with its figurative and gestural potential, could not be forgone. "Since ours is an oral culture, I wanted to show reality through masks, dance, and representations. The publication of a book written in French reaches only a minority, whereas via film one can do as Dziga Vertov did with his 'Kino Pravda'," Sembène believed (Levieux 2004). In light of Léopold Senghor's advocacy of La Francophonie, some have pointed out that Sembène's opting for the language of cinema even "fulfils the same function as the Gĩkũyũ language does for Ngũgĩ"

(Messier 2011, 4). His work's commitment to African futurity certainly bears parallels to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's political rationale for setting aside English, although Sembène's films may not quite share the same emphasis on ethnocultural return. For example, as the discussion of self-fashioning here will illustrate, the film's disapproval of the Senegalese bourgeoisie's substitution of diverse, dynamic, quotidian kinds of African culture for "African Culture", an ossified and fictitious monolith they then applaud as "Africanity", better aligns Sembène's criticism with Frantz Fanon's similar warning that the African comprador bourgeoisie will seek to hide their economic powerlessness with the reification of the "mummified fragments" of African cultures: "Long speeches will be made about the artisan class… [the native elites] will surround the artisan class with a chauvinistic tenderness in keeping with the new awareness of national dignity" (2001, 119). While we cannot discount Sembène's Marxist orientation as a key drivers of his works, on the other hand, Lindiwe Dovey has shown that lifelong Marxists like Sembène and Sarah Maldoror did not necessarily think the Soviet approach appropriate for African filmmakers, either (2020). Whereas both felt deeply indebted to the dialectical montage of Sergei Eisenstein, they felt a "lack of freedom of expression" during their training in socialist realism at Moscow's Gorky Film Studio in the 1960's (Dovey 5). For Sembène, this especially meant the freedom to explore the possibilities of a realist cinematic form that can nonetheless include some African oral storytelling forms. He succeeded in his search for such a filmic language, as his *Xala* harnesses satire, culture, politics and ritual to cohere in creative and unexpected ways.

To probe the aforementioned connections that *Xala* illuminates between neocolonial material conditions and the formation of subjectivities, I will pay close attention to certain diegetic and aesthetic choices that particularly work in the service of these connections: namely, how the film presents self-fashioning as a site for meaning-making that has wide political-economic implications, and how the visuals of those scenes where the politics of language come to the fore – an element less considered than dialogue in scholarship focused on Sembène's use of language in this film (Vetinde 2012; Murphy 2002) – complicates dichotomous interpretations of the character of Rama. As such, although I broadly agree with work like Matthew H. Brown's (2015) which posits that *Xala*'s allegory constructs characters' subjectivities in relation to collective concerns, I propose that it is by seeing this relationality as *Xala*'s starting point, rather than its representational goal, that we can understand how and why the film then utilises the issue of subjectivity to deepen its political critique. It is not a translation *from* but a relation *between* subjectivity and the material realities of arrested decolonisation that *Xala* demonstrates, as characters are not just stand-ins for his class critique but a fundamental part of that critique in that they either reach for or reject (whether consciously or unconsciously) the logics of neocolonialism and consumer capitalism in order to help constitute their subjectivities. In showing the viewer how the neocoloniality of the

native bourgeoisie endangers the transformation of African societies, the themes of land, self-fashioning and language provide Sembène inroads into representing the relation between subjectivity and material decolonisation as it unfolds in the everyday lives of Senegalese of different classes. Housed in the "wax" of satire and allegory, to draw from Teshome Gabriel's conceptualisation (1980), is not only the "gold" that is the "ideological significance" of *Xala* (Landy 1984, 41), but the "gold" that is its politicisation of subject-formation within the historical context of neocolonialism in West Africa.

Africanity's New Clothes

Self-fashioning, in the very literal sense of clothing intended to indicate certain characteristics about oneself that are socially understood, is of collective political consequence in *Xala.* The persisting effects of colonial ideologies on Senegal's post-independence ruling classes are unmistakeable in the sartorial choices of the president of the Chamber of Commerce, El-Hadji, and their fellow "socialist" businessmen. Although the European suits of this class of men, and the French dresses sported by El Hadji's second wife Oumi N'Doye, have been discussed as indicative of the native ruling class's alignment with Western interests (Messier 2011, 14; Gugler and Diop 1998, 149), less has been said on how this also reveals a self-fashioning based on the idea of imitation, rather than full affiliation with the neocolonial power. The French suits here works largely to signify in private El-Hadji's mark of belonging in the Chamber of Commerce: a space cut off both from the life of the nation, *and* from where the flows of Western capital are decided. This self-delusion – infantile in its satisfaction with the mere cosmetics of power – is affirmed when Sembène shows that these men essentially "dress up" on Independence Day in order to receive a designated amount of Francs in briefcases from white deputies. This class mimicry without economic autonomy signifies a loss (or indeed, sale) of self, given how quickly they change costume from the opening scene where, dressed in everyday *boubous,* they were waved into the Chamber by a joyful crowd. This is encapsulated in a banal exchange where El-Hadji proclaims to his fellow businessmen that "modernity mustn't make us lose our Africanity". This prompts another member, dressed in an extravagant white tuxedo, to applaud and respond enthusiastically: "Too right! Long live Africanity!" The moment is reminiscent of the critique Fanon made in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964, 196) when he warned an "absence of ideology" was "the greater danger which threatens Africa" at the cusp of the independences. Amílcar Cabral echoed him when he remarked that "Africa's postcolonial history is one of unfulfilled missions because the national leadership has been lacking in revolutionary theory and ideology" (1966, n.p.). El-Hadji and his class partake of a surface mimicry that borrows ideological terms like "modernity" and

"Africanity", but not out of some attempt to find syntheses (if that is what their proclamation is meant to suggest, and if we were to grant any stability to these two concepts).[2] They do so instead by capitalising on "ideology as smorgasbord", in Barbara Foley's description, wherein "ruling-class hegemony, as well as enhanced possibilities for capital accumulation, can be secured by any number of routes of ideological transmission" (2019, 70). The men in this scene, chameleon-like in their quick succession of changes in self-stylisation, dip into being harbingers of "modernity" (some vague idea of capitalist growth), and then into being the defenders of "Africanity" (through a dubious interpretation, as Vartan Messier points out [2011, 13], of what the Qur'an contains on polygamy). What brings Sembène's critique full circle here to the question of who these men even are – what cultural, social and economic affiliations help constitute their subjectivities – is that their use of "ideology as smorgasbord" secures them only petty accumulation, not hegemony or economic autonomy. As the white French deputy who looms silently behind the president of the Chamber reminds us the viewer, El-Hadji and his class have no ideology, whether "modernity" (capitalist restructuring) or "Africanity", and they have exchanged no real power for the cipher-like subjectivities in a global order to which '70s Senegal is bound via the terms of French neocolonialism.

Sembène adds a temporal layer to these significant sartorial choices through a disjunction between voice-over and diegetic action in this opening sequence, wherein a temporal lag between the visuals on screen and the voice-over interpreting what we are seeing builds expectations of a particular future that, in simultaneous on-screen time, is being rendered improbable. For instance, in the lead-up to the meeting, the voice-over tells of transforming Senegal's economic and political structures according to the will of its people: "We must control our industry, our commerce, our culture, in order to take into our hands our destiny". The images on-screen are at first harmonious with this audio. Into the Chamber enter a group of Senegalese men dressed in plain *boubous;* some escort the European deputies out of the room, while others remove marble busts of Marie Antoinette and Napoleon Bonaparte and leave them outside for people to see.[3] Jubilant drumming sounds in the background as the public celebrates. The full cultural, political and economic restitution implied by this sequence is then swiftly disrupted by a costume change: the very same men return to the Chamber in the aforementioned suits the following day, but the voice-over has not yet finished recounting the revolutionary days to come. Despite the aural continuity of these two scenes, the fluidity of the men's self stylisations present an unmistakeable visual juxtaposition. A central tenet

[2] See also Paul A. Beckett (1980) on Fanon's critique of the "absence of ideology" amongst post-independence African governments and leaders.

[3] So revealing were the scenes where Marie Antoinette's bust is removed and French deputies hand over briefcases of money to the Senegalese elite that they were censored in France (Sembène in Busch and Annas 2008, 75).

of the theory of the Soviet school of filmmaking, the ideological and aesthetic grounds for utilising montage in jarring ways to generate meaning would have been familiar to Sembène from his film education in Moscow. He adapts the technique here to work beyond the spatial (two shots contrasting in content) by extending to the temporal level this overlay of contradiction (the bringing together of two jarring narratives about national decolonisation, one in visual terms, costume, and one in aural, voice-over). This separation of audio and image in the film's introduction relates the implications of the self-fashionings of El-Hadji and his class upon the future of their society as a whole, and reveals that their subjectivities are severed from their cultural and social moorings for no real political and economic gain.

Self-fashioning in *Xala* connects the constitution of subjectivities to the material circumstances of neocolonialism not only on these negative terms of mimicry, but also on promising terms through examples of effortless cultural fusion. After the opening sequence, the film introduces an array of characters who prefer the fez or the head wrap, including a farmer whose storyline merges with the beggars; Adja Awa Astou, El-Hadji's devout first wife; and characters who, according to the spaces they move in, switch between *boubous* and the fashions of a global '70s youth counter-culture, such as El-Hadji's daughter Rama.[4] However, as *Xala*'s sartorial choices thus set up what may be examples of subject-positions that arise from lived experience, so do they complicate any simple pairings such as elites/falsehood and masses/authenticity. This ambiguity, I would contend, results from Sembène's dialectical point-of-view rather than some kind of relativism; a somewhat tragicomic scene that complicates these binaries, for instance, does so in ways that do not posit this ambiguity as natural or found – instead, it draws our attention to the mutually effectual relationship between subjectivities and a material neocolonialism (here symbolised by a commodity an ordinary person can afford). A young man who looks neither poor nor desperate steals a farmer's money in the midst of a street commotion, then goes to a tailor to spend his stolen funds on a strange new outfit: a dark suit similar to that of the Frenchmen of the Chamber, plus an American cowboy hat. As the viewer soon finds out that what he stole were the precious savings of the farmer's entire village, this sequence cements *Xala*'s sartorial allegory as one about the relationship between the shaping of subjectivities now, and the social relations to come in future. The suggestion that American capital has an entire market to gain upon any weakening of French cultural hegemony in West Africa is clear: the kitsch symbol of the U.S., the cowboy hat, has quite literally been bought into in this scene by an ordinary Senegalese citizen, with money stolen from the overwhelmingly agrarian country's most productive class. The masses-as-authentic idea is troubled by the fact that, in this scene, Sembène shows that those symbols and

[4] See also Ophélie Rillon (2018) on youth fashion and politics in '60s and '70s West Africa.

objects the working classes reach for in order to style themselves in the public sphere are beginning to reflect the cultural disconnection and commodity worship that informs the subjectivities of El Hadji and his class. The ontological security sought by the ordinary person who is dispossessed, unemployed and/or marginalised in post-independence Senegalese society is here shown as being capitalised on by American cultural imperialism, turning the constitution of selfhood into a mere exercise in consumer choice; it is subjectivity free of any social embeddedness or social obligation. In the true victim here being the robbed farmer, the scene also brings us to the foundational issue that Sembène will later reveal as having set the story in motion well before it started: direct and indirect theft of the land and its fruits. *Xala's* attention to the sartorial and other modes of self-fashioning in this first half of the film thus initiate the viewer into the foundational – and rapidly transforming – relationality that is to prove key throughout the film.

"Even the insults, in the purest Francophone tradition!"

Xala's treatment of language consolidates this relationality and its social consequences, while raising important questions regarding the persistence of colonialism's legacy despite evolved appearances. In an interview, Sembène argues that "[The El-Hadji] types are alienated to such an extent… [that] they are always the first to say people's mentalities have to be decolonised, but it is actually [theirs] which has to be," (2008, 73). Elsewhere, he has related this idea about decolonisation on a subjective level ("mentalities") to the functionings of French in Senegal, saying he "has no complex about using French […] it is no more or less than a working tool" (Sembène in Fofana 2012, 105). His choosing a psychiatric term is telling. The notion of not making French "a complex" is one that Fanon identifies as a subjective and structural task of decolonisation, for the French language itself has a hand in creating the "internalisation – or, better, epidermalisation, of this inferiority complex" (1986, 4). Due to the impossibility of dissociating a language from the cultural values it perpetuates, for Fanon "to speak… means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation" (1986, 89), which recalls the power of language in (post)colonial contexts to perpetuate or challenge, at one and the same time, cultural alienation (the internalisation of colonial hierarchies) and material conditions (the literally crushing "weight" of Europe's "civilisation" on the colonised).

While the cultural and political meaning of French in *Xala* is a point of discussion in most Sembène scholarship (Harrow 1980; Mushengyezi 2004; Vetinde 2012), these Fanonian "psychopolitics" (Hook 2004) have not necessarily been unpacked in analyses of El Hadji's preference for French and his daughter Rama's for Wolof that choose to respectively interpret them

as representing the neocolonial present and the revolutionary pan-Africanism of its possible future. As one who has wholeheartedly embraced the economic practices of the neocolonial nation-state, French is undoubtedly "a complex" for El-Hadji in the sense Sembène uses it above. We witness on several occasions he insists on replying in French when spoken to in Wolof; shouts in frustration at Rama when not spoken to in French; and in his only moment of rebellion in the film, where he lists the hypocrisies of his fellow businessmen, he is cowed into continuing in French even though he begun in Wolof. What I am interested in here is proceeding from the established interpretation of this as an allegory of the Senegalese bourgeoisie's willing alignment with neocolonial capitalism, to examining its functioning at the level of Sembène's related concern: that of El Hadji's "mentality", which I will seek to highlight as a decidedly *material* component of Sembène's class critique, and that of whether educated African youth, symbolised by Rama, are positioned to undo this collective "mentality" with material consequences.

The function of French brings the viewer to the heart of one of the film's key concerns: that such seemingly subjective "complexes" of the native elite, which play out in private (between father and daughter, wife and husband), matter because they influence the daily lives of a majority who may be grappling with no such "complexes". "We have a bourgeoisie who only feel significant when they express themselves in French," Sembène observes (2008, 73); it is this collective inferiority complex, borne of subjectivities that draw on closeness to the Western bourgeoise for their ontological security, that results in insidious long-term effects on the material lives of ordinary people – people who have urgent material needs that need the postcolonial state's attention, and may or may not be experiencing any such cultural alienation like that of their elites. A satirical scene captures this well: "El-Hadji may speak, but only if in French," pronounces the president of the Chamber of Commerce after El-Hadji is voted out of his position for neglecting his debts. "Even the insults, in the purest Francophone tradition!" he adds in utter seriousness. This may seem comical, but as Sembène points out, it is no more so than a bourgeoise "[who] speaks to the peasants in French. In a country with 80 percent illiteracy, speeches, which are supposed to talk about their problems, go right over their heads" (2008, 74). This is the far more urgent critique that *Xala* seeks to arrive at: that "when the bourgeoisie committed this flagrant error [of aspiring to France], they drew an entire people after them" (Sembène 2008, 74), summarised in the image of people being spoken to about their everyday problems by those who who seek to signal status to foreign powers, rather than to be understood by their own citizens. In *Xala*, the urgency of these conditions of "linguistic drama" (Albert Memmi 1965, 108), and "psychological drama" (Fofana 2012, 103) lie not in the cultural alienation of the African bourgeoisie, but in its wider structural consequences.

This is where a more critical approach to the character of Rama also proves insightful, because if we are to sustain the canonical reading of her as the symbol of a politically conscious, youth vanguard of pan-African socialism, we arrive at the interpretation that the atonement, re-education, or re-socialisation of the governing class (a successful embodiment being the next generation, in El Hadji's daughter) is what Sembène is suggesting will liberate African societies. There is, however, cause – in both biographical knowledge of the director (Berthomé 2007; Gadjigo 2008) and in *Xala* itself – to argue that such an interpretation de-radicalises Sembène's vision. On the contrary, as *Xala's* attention to the many dimensions of language choice in the ostensible "private" and "public" spaces of the film suggest, the "complexes" of this class are manifest in widespread and *material* ways – they have given shape to the practices of self-stylisation and social signalling that bespeak power in post-independence society. As such, liberation (which may or may not include the disalienation of this class) cannot but be the transformation of material life itself. Understood within this context of Sembène's politics, the character of Rama begins to draw attention to the fact that the fraught and overlapping terrain of language and subjectivity in postcolonial Senegal leaves few out of its remit.

El-Hadji's eldest daughter prefers the common linguistic practices of Senegal (which is to use French primarily for official business) and makes a point of otherwise speaking in Wolof. Arguably, in Rama's pragmatic approach, French suffers a stronger ideological blow than outright rejection: reduced to supplementariness, it recall's Sembène's own position on French as "a working tool" (Sembène in Fofana 2012, 105). But much has also been written, not least by Fanon, on how political consciousness does not mark an end to the identity struggles of postcolonial intelligensias, who often situate themselves in relation to two systems of cultural reference. Is Rama's reduction of French to supplementarity *Xala*'s suggested antidote to neocolonial Senegal? As a young Pan-Africanist, her refusal to address her father in French is a declaration of political separation from the older generation. This angers and discomfits El-Hadji, certainly, and underscores *Xala*'s critique of language as a "locus of unconscious servility" (Trinh T. Minh-Ha 1989, 52). Through Rama's position, the viewer also understands that the use of French "estranges [El Hadji] from his own child and even from himself. It makes him feel like someone else by drawing a line of demarcation between him and the majority of people in his own society" (Fofana 2012, 103).

However, we can assume the neocolonial socio-economic conditions depicted in *Xala* determine the contours of Rama's political potential, because these conditions determine the very subjectivities that daily grapple with them. For instance, Rama's fluent French response to a police officer who stops her, in addition to the fact that she is driving her own car at the time, together

function as a class-based warning to the postcolonial authorities that she is not to be harassed. This is on the one hand a subject-positioning necessitated by Senegal's postcolonial reality, where French and Wolof have their domains – institutional and social, respectively. But as Rama warns authority of her consciousness of and ability to understand the role of French in tactics of everyday domination, she becomes a more ambivalent character than scholarly interpretations of her radicalism suggest. If El-Hadji and his class perpetuate their unconscious servility via (and in turn bind the nation to) La Francophonie, what are we to make of Rama, a politically conscious elite woman, choosing to utilise it for mobility and access? The exclusivity of this mobility and access is undeniable: in another scene, Rama rides her motorcycle to her father's office and is welcomed deferentially by his security guard, who is otherwise tasked with forcing beggars away from the building. Given that through El-Hadji *Xala* has established that the consequences of language use in the postcolonial context are ones directly related to the formation of subjectivity, Rama's occasional weaponisation of French cannot be without social and subjective consequences.

Although Rama's politics means she is attuned to the substance of this everyday to a greater extent than her father, *Xala* hints at the asymmetrical oppressions of the bourgeoisie's embrace of La Francophonie (a crisis of subjectivity for them, material deprivation for the masses). In thus implying that the cultural imperialism of La Francophonie may not be necessarily be confronted by the children of the West African bourgeoisie, Sembène points to the fact that embracing African languages and cultures neither indicates the economic liberation of the continent, nor necessarily the end of colonialism's legacy at the level of "mentalities". This is not to say the rejuvenation of African languages is not an important idea of anti-colonialism and cultural liberation, but to open up a space for recognising that *Xala* also has important misgivings about its usage as a substitute for the many material projects that should make up what Aimé Césaire in 1959 presciently called "a good decolonisation, without aftermath" (126). Therefore, although at first seemingly a straightforward allegory that functions via the setting up of clear dichotomies (El-Hadji/Rama, old/young, Francophile/Pan-African, bourgeois/revolutionary), language is a "specific relationship to the world" and the self (Ngũgĩ 1981, 16), and its ability to shape that relationship still, *Xala* demonstrates, lies in its economic power, however cultural its manifestations also are.

The state of the land

Collective wealth theft, which the climax of the film explicitly reveals as having its foundations in land theft, is the crux via which *Xala* makes its decisive linkage between the constitution of subjectivities and the material conditions of neocolonialism. Before the spitting

ritual that marks the film's striking ending begins, the beggars' blind leader Gorgui reveals that he has been rendered landless by the expropriation of Lebu lands – people to whom Gorgui (and distantly, El-Hadji) belong, and who gradually lost their land throughout the late 1970s to 80s as they were bought for a pittance then opened to privatisation. "What I am now is your fault. Do you remember selling a large piece of land at Jeko belonging to our clan? After falsifying the clan names, you took our land from us," Gorgui accuses. Land loss also signifies here the loss of things that reassure one's subjectivity, including lineage, family, place, labour practices, communal knowledges and interpersonal relations that surround and form a life of living upon the land. The historical background to which this plot twist gestures is one that allows Sembène to make a direct link between colonial and postcolonial conditions in Senegal. Public health concerns were first used by the colonial authorities in Dakar in 1916 to segregate the city and expropriate land, eradicating certain Lebu villages completely (Goldblatt 2020). At the time of *Xala's* making, but gaining momentum in the early 1980s in Senegal, was the commodification of land organised around family networks; the Lebu progressively lost much of their remaining land (and with it, their customary labours in agriculture and fishing).[5] The once-collective ownership of land in kinship networks functions in *Xala* in articulation of "the space of a past and future utopia – a social world of collective cooperation" (Jameson 1986, 84), which the new post-independence national bourgeoisie have exchanged in return for integration into the global capitalist economy at its lowest rungs. It unearths the "clientelist strategies of political and economic control" of the "rentier class" (Boone 1990, 426-7) in Senegal that facilitated neither socialist transformation nor local capital accumulation, leaving the majority of the nation dependent upon connections to or aspirations towards being the political class.

This exposé is an understood reading of Sembène's film, but has less often been expanded on in the context of its climax, where discussion has focused on the scene's ritualistic punishment and/or purification of the bourgeoisie by the people (Brown 2015; Mushengyezi 2004; Lynn 2004). Yet it is also a climax wherein the El-Hadjis of the nation are confronted for their utilising at face-value their social and economic ties to their poorer kin (who may assume their better-off brethren still sustain the familial codes they do) in order to secure their trust, whilst eschewing the responsibilities of being the keepers of this trust. It also illustrates that the postcolonial elite's crises of subjectivity, deriving amongst other things from their cultural mimicry and refusal of customary social responsibilities, is not just a product of the historic colonialism that dispossessed them to a degree too, but of independence – independence of the kind that sustained conditions amenable to

[5] See also Hannah Cross (2013) on the dispossession of the Lebu and their now forming one of the largest groups of clandestine migrants to the EU.

clientelism. As such, although "Sembène's portrayal of the beggars echoes Fanon's faith in the revolutionary potential of the *lumpenproletariat* rather than Marx's dismissive view of it" (Gugler and Diop 1998, 149), when we situate this *lumpenproletariat* that avenges itself as the recently dispossessed peasantry that they are, we can discern the contours of a triangulation between collective land ownership, subject-formation, and social embeddedness or intersubjectivity emerging in Sembène's climax.

This triangulation is suggested through techniques that enact a reveal and a contrast, which rely on the climax to work. The reveal is that the series of events that make up the film were triggered not by the *xala* but by an earlier act – El-Hadji's sale of his kin's land, and his subsequent running away from what Jameson coins the "primordial crime of capitalism" (1986, 84) – the theft of collective wealth. His "crime" is directly linked to the main character's desubjectification; the beggars invite him to partake of the ritual so as to reclaim "the only thing he has left" to regain, his virility. The way they present this actually minimises the reclamation of what would presumably be the full resolution of the (surface) problem of the film: the curse of impotence. If his virility is "the only thing left", the implication that he can have his manhood back (but that is all he will get back) gestures to the unsaid assertion that without embeddedness in the social relations and responsibilities that he has sold, El Hadji has no ontological security beyond his fleeting possession of commodities. Just as that which assured Gorgui's subjectivity and economic survival (his labours upon his land) have been taken away, this invites us to interpret the climax as also one that asserts social obligation as the grounds of ontologically secure subjectivity formation.

A contrast, established in the "background" throughout the film via both narrative and formal methods, also grows clear in Sembène's final sequences. The beggars/dispossessed farmers have animated the naturalistic scenes of Dakar street life throughout *Xala*, offering blessings or playing tunes on the *khalam* as they sit on street corners in twos or threes. They are vividly differentiated through their physical appearance, age and bearing, suggesting a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Their collective way of life, however, has ensured their survival: we witness, for example, the group preparing tea for everyone using a tin of condensed milk one of their number have procured, inviting the distraught farmer to join them and unburden himself. Gorgui, to nobody's protest, silently hands the farmer a portion of what must have been everyone's hard-earned cash from that morning. This scene is one of several that establish the beggars/dispossessed farmers operate with an entirely different set of values – ones that draw on solidarity in their shared socio-economic circumstances, customary Wolof social bonds, and perhaps also Islamic teachings against covetousness – in order to help fashion the morals they sustain within their group. They embody what Sam Opondo identifies as an "engagement with the

micropolitical and transgressive practices of everyday life" in Sembène's entire *oeuvre* (2015, 41), an engagement that highlights the capacities of the most powerless to create social change. This is cemented by the transformative experience the companionship of the beggars have on the farmer: they are more politically conscious than the latter, and in their company, the farmer who initially accepted the theft of his village funds as *al-Qadr* (Allah's divine preordainment) grows to recognise he is due reparations in this life.

The beggars' powerfully collectivised subjectivities under conditions of marginalisation contrast with El Hadji's comfortable condition and utterly desubjectified state in the finale (his job, credit, two wives, and all children but Rama gone). This allows Sembène to demonstrate an altogether different relation between the processes of subjectivity formation and the material conditions of neocolonialism. With the social and political meaning of their act established, the beggars transform their subjective sufferings into an act of collective refusal – they refuse to demand El-Hadji's stolen wealth as compensation for their land loss, and they refuse to await from his class a justice they cannot deliver. The close of *Xala* seals what my reading has sought to highlight: that Sembène's film begins from an understanding that the necessary confrontation with neocolonialism may be beyond the consciousness of the West African political class to see, and beyond its capacity (or desire) to undo. It proceeds to unpack the very subjectivities that neocolonial conditions – encapsulated in the primary crime of land theft – have constituted, and the social embeddedness and responsibility that promise other grounds for subjectivity formation. In accepting the ritual, El-Hadji finally accepts the power of the social bonds he sold away, but the film ends before we know whether or not his *xala* is cured – whether or not, in other words, he can return from his rejection of intersubjectivity and social responsibility, the sources of the collective power and agency of the other subjectivities present in this climactic ending.

Conclusion

Xala urges sight of the relationship between structures and subjectivities under conditions of neocolonialism, speaking to the configurations of power that authorise elites as well as holding accountable the actions of individuals within all classes of Senegalese postcolonial society (albeit some more than others). This essay has sought to build upon existing scholarship of this canonical text by drawing attention to this under-articulated relationship, and by stressing how it is imperative to surfacing the key concern of Sembène's film: how the crises of subjectivity amongst the West African elite are experienced by their populace in the form of actual material and cultural losses. Examined in relation to this is the foundational promise of ontological and structural decolonisation

that land restitution and redistribution holds. Tracing the film's careful consideration of the politics of clothing and language yields the initial contours of this critique; the native bourgeoisie's sartorial self-stylisations demonstrate the vacuity and mimicry that substitutes purchasing power as a means of constituting one's subjectivity, whilst cultural restitution – although a non-negotiable for decolonisation – is questioned through hints at the class contingency of Rama's advocacy of Wolof. Finally, with the reveal of the "primordial crime" of collective wealth theft and El Hadji's desubjectification, subjectivity emerges as a conducive site of agency for the beggars/dispossessed farmers. It is informed by their social embeddedness, via which they have collectivised their lived experiences of oppression. Having demystified the mechanisms by which they have been marginalised, they refuse to be paid off in exchange for being severed from the land and their labours.

Sembène leaves us with a strong sense of the socio-cultural power of the popular mandate, and the viewer understands that the true impotence of the post-independence governing classes is having irrevocably shunned this for the limited benefits of playing Euro-American capital's intermediary. Through the complex themes of self-fashioning, language, and land theft, *Xala* is able to explore several facets to its political allegory, while bringing questions of subjectivity to the fore. In doing so, this canonical film continues to remind its viewer that who we are depends on and changes with the structural conditions we are willing to accept.

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