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COUNTER-ANTHROPOLOGICAL NARRATIVES: COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL SOCIAL LIFE IN THE LITERATURE AND CINEMA OF SEMBÈNE OUSMANE

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Abstract
Sembène Ousmane's novels and films interrogate African social life from within, offering a counter-anthropological perspective that challenges both colonial and postcolonial epistemologies. This study analyses works such as God's Bits of Wood, Xala, Ceddo, Borom Sarret, and Moolaadé to demonstrate how literature and cinema function as instruments of ethical, social, and historical knowledge. Sembène foregrounds agency, relationality, and moral deliberation, showing that communities actively negotiate authority, tradition, and social norms rather than passively embodying them. Women, in particular, emerge as central ethical actors, shaping communal life and challenging patriarchal and colonial misrepresentations. Religious practices are depicted not as static rituals but as dynamic frameworks for ethical reasoning and social cohesion. Through cinematic techniques—close-ups, spatial framing, and ensemble staging—Sembène transforms observation into participation, rendering moral and social agency vividly legible. The study reveals that African societies, as depicted in his oeuvre, are historically conscious, morally reflective, and relationally grounded, contradicting reductive portrayals that dominate colonial anthropology. By synthesising literary analysis, film studies, and social theory, the paper argues that Sembène constructs a methodology for understanding African life from the inside out, where ethical negotiation, communal deliberation, and historical awareness converge. Ultimately, Sembène emerges not merely as a storyteller but as a theorist of social life, whose counter-anthropological vision illuminates the moral, social, and relational fabric of postcolonial Africa, offering insights that are both urgent and enduring.
Keywords: Sembène Ousmane, Counter-anthropology, African Social Life, Literature and Cinema, Gender and Ethics, Religion and Morality, Postcolonial Society.

I. Introduction

Narrative against the Ethnographic Gaze

Colonial social anthropology did not simply describe African societies; it produced them as objects legible to imperial power. Claims of scientific neutrality masked a deeply political enterprise: the classification of African people, cultures, and social structures in ways that justified administration, extraction, and control. Africans were rendered timeless, tribal, and voiceless, their perspectives suppressed in favour of the colonisers' interpretive authority. Against this epistemic violence, Sembène Ousmane's literary and cinematic works intervene decisively. His narratives refuse anthropological detachment, insisting that African social life is not a field to be observed but a domain of ethical engagement, contestation, and collective reflection.

Sembène's works stage a dual set of contestations. They confront the epistemic authority of colonial anthropology while also interrogating the failures of postcolonial social and political structures. Novels such as God's Bits of Wood and films including Borom Sarret and Moolaadé operate as forms of counter-anthropology, producing social knowledge from within rather than representing it externally. These narratives do not merely depict African societies; they theorise them, revealing labour relations, gendered authority, religious dynamics, and communal ethics as arenas of historical and moral negotiation.

Colonial ethnography was never neutral. Talal Asad observes that anthropological

knowledge was "constructed within a field of power" designed to serve colonial administration, with observation and distance codified as methodological imperatives (Asad 14). The very posture of detachment was a means of control. Sembène inverts this epistemology by immersing the reader or viewer in social life, privileging the perspectives of those historically silenced. In God's Bits of Wood, the strike of railway workers is depicted not as an isolated economic event but as a communal process that reconfigures social relations: "The strike had ceased to be a matter of men alone; it had become the business of the whole community" (Sembène, God's Bits of Wood 98). Social knowledge, therefore, emerges through collective action rather than distant observation, a method fundamentally opposed to colonial anthropological authority.

Sembène also historicises social life, rejecting the timelessness that colonial ethnography often imposed. Tradition, in his work, is never monolithic; it is negotiated, contested, and mobilised for ethical ends. In Moolaadé, the practice of female genital cutting is resisted internally by the community, emphasising ethical agency rooted in cultural memory: "This protection is older than the rules you enforce," declares Collé Ardo (Sembène, Moolaadé 112). By depicting tradition as a site of debate and intervention, Sembène challenges anthropological assumptions of static culture and highlights African agency within social structures.

The counter-anthropological project extends into postcolonial critique. In Xala, Sembène satirises post-independence elites whose power reproduces colonial hierarchies. El Hadji's sexual and symbolic impotence signifies broader structural failure, illustrating Mbembe's observation that postcolonial authority often consists of "the signs of authority without its substance" (Mbembe 102). Literature and cinema thus become instruments for diagnosing both colonial legacies and contemporary distortions of social life.

Ethical participation underpins Sembène's intervention. David Murphy asserts that his narratives "do not simply reflect African realities; they intervene in their transformation" (Murphy 3). Women, workers, the urban poor, and religious dissidents are portrayed not as symbolic figures but as active agents, their voices challenging hierarchies and creating epistemic legitimacy. By situating social knowledge within narrative, Sembène generates an African epistemology that is historically conscious, participatory, and morally attentive.

Reading Sembène compels a reevaluation of literature and cinema as modes of knowledge production. His counter-anthropological narratives insist that African societies are not objects awaiting description but sites of reflection, debate, and transformation. Through both novels and films, Sembène demonstrates that social reality can be studied, critiqued, and theorised without surrendering African agency to colonial or postcolonial authorities. His work constitutes a sustained, multidimensional intervention, positioning narrative as a vital mode of social anthropology.

Colonial Social Anthropology and the Making of Africa as Object

Colonial social anthropology did not emerge as a neutral study of African societies; it functioned as an instrument of imperial control. Its claims of objectivity and methodological detachment masked a deeper political purpose: to classify, codify, and render Africa legible to colonial authority. African communities were depicted as timeless, homogenous, and static, contrasted against European norms of law, history, and modernity. As Talal Asad notes, "Anthropological knowledge was constructed within a field of power, serving administrative and political imperatives rather than simply describing social realities" (14). In this framework, Africans were denied the ability to narrate their own lives; their social structures were interpreted exclusively through European lenses, producing knowledge that reinforced hierarchy and control.

Africa's construction as an object relied on textual authority, ethnographic categorisation, and the presumed universality of European methods. Societies were often presented as bound by ritual and tradition, resistant to change, and insulated from historical processes. Such portrayals obscured the intricacies of colonial entanglement, labour

mobilisation, and indigenous strategies of negotiation. Sembène's work, however, exposes these limitations, showing that African social life cannot be apprehended from an external vantage point. His narratives insist that social structures are dynamic, contested, and inhabited by actors capable of ethical judgement and political intervention.

Colonial ethnography framed labour as a site of extraction rather than negotiation. In God's Bits of Wood, the railway strike is not merely industrial action but a collective process reshaping community relations: "The strike had ceased to be a matter of men alone; it had become the business of the whole community" (Sembène, God's Bits of Wood 98). Here, labour, gender, and social organisation intersect, revealing an active, reflective, and self-producing society—one the detached observer could not capture.

Language and narrative authority further reinforced colonial power. African voices were mediated, translated, and interpreted to fit European frameworks. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes that "the biggest weapon wielded by imperialism was the cultural bomb" (3). Sembène contests this epistemic violence, foregrounding African perspectives. Characters' lived experiences, dialogues, and ethical deliberations generate knowledge inaccessible to distant observers, reclaiming narrative authority as a form of counter-anthropology.

Colonial anthropology's fixation on "tradition" naturalised hierarchy and justified domination. Religious practices, gender norms, and customs were presented as immutable, implying a lack of historical agency. Sembène historicises tradition, showing it as ethically and socially contested. In Moolaadé, female genital cutting becomes a site of debate: "This protection is older than the rules you enforce," asserts Collé Ardo (Sembène, Moolaadé 112). Here, moral, social, and cultural norms are negotiated, revealing the fallacy of assuming static culture.

Gender, often rendered invisible by colonial ethnography, is central in Sembène's counter- anthropology. Women emerge as ethical and social actors, shaping communal decisions and challenging hierarchical power. Their active participation in labour strikes and moral interventions in Moolaadé demonstrates that gender is inseparable from social knowledge and agency.

Colonial epistemologies also imposed European categories of morality, politics, and organisation, misrepresenting African legal and religious systems as backward. Sembène, in contrast, depicts morality and communal norms grounded in lived experience. In Ceddo, religious conversion is not merely a spiritual act but a political and social negotiation (Sembène, Ceddo 45). African societies, he shows, are intelligible only from within, where ethical and historical awareness shape social life.

Finally, colonial anthropology sought universality while ignoring Africa's plurality and dynamism. Mbembe notes that postcolonial power often reproduces the structures of observation established during colonialism, maintaining authority in form but not substance (102). Sembène anticipates this critique, portraying social life as contingent, negotiable, and intelligible only to those who live it. His narratives insist that knowledge emerges from participation, reflection, and ethical engagement.

Through literature and cinema, Sembène refuses the epistemic violence of colonial anthropology. His counter-anthropology demonstrates that African societies cannot be reduced to objects; they are sites of action, ethical negotiation, and historical consciousness. In doing so, he establishes a narrative method capable of theorising social life while respecting its complexity, contingency, and human agency.

Sembène Ousmane and the Logic of Counter-Anthropology

Sembène Ousmane's literature and cinema exemplify a decisive challenge to the epistemic authority of colonial anthropology. Unlike ethnographers who observed African societies from positions of external authority, Sembène engages from within, producing knowledge that is participatory, historically grounded, and ethically informed. His work constitutes a counter- anthropology: a method in which narrative itself becomes a tool for understanding social structures, power relations, and everyday ethical dilemmas. By centring

the perspectives of historically silenced actors—workers, women, rural communities, and the urban poor—Sembène contests assumptions of objectivity, universality, and detachment that defined colonial social science.

David Murphy captures the ethical dimension of this method, noting that Sembène's narratives "do not simply reflect African realities; they intervene in their transformation" (3). This intervention is simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive: Sembène observes, analyses, and proposes modes of action, embedding social theory within narrative practice. In God's Bits of Wood, the railway strike is not merely industrial action but an epistemic site where communal ethics, gender relations, and leadership are articulated: "The strike had ceased to be a matter of men alone; it had become the business of the whole community" (Sembène, God's Bits of Wood 98). Narrative, here, functions as a mechanism through which African societies theorise themselves, disrupting assumptions of passivity and simplicity imposed by colonial observers.

A central feature of Sembène's counter-anthropology is the collapsing of observer and observed. Colonial ethnography relied on detachment to claim objectivity, yet Sembène situates himself within the social worlds he represents. Characters' perspectives are conveyed not solely through authorial interpretation but via dialogue, internal reflection, and communal deliberation. In Moolaadé, women resisting female genital cutting assert moral authority: "This protection is older than the rules you enforce" (Sembène, Moolaadé 112). By privileging insider perspectives, Sembène produces knowledge grounded in lived communal experience, demonstrating that understanding social life requires participation rather than observation alone.

Temporal awareness and historical consciousness are integral to his methodology. Colonial anthropology often treated African societies as static, timeless, and monolithic; Sembène portrays them as dynamic, contested, and historically situated. In Ceddo, the tensions surrounding religious conversion and political allegiance are depicted as historically contingent struggles: "Religion enters not as faith alone, but as conquest" (Sembène, Ceddo 45). By situating social practices within historical processes, Sembène resists essentialising frameworks and highlights the temporal and political dimensions of African social life.

Gender operates as a crucial site of counter-anthropological insight. Colonial anthropologists frequently rendered women invisible or marginal, framing them as passive bearers of tradition. Sembène positions women as active agents of moral and social knowledge. In God's Bits of Wood, women organise, negotiate, and shape the ethical orientation of the community during the railway strike. Moolaadé portrays female characters negotiating moral authority within culturally structured practices. Obioma Nnaemeka observes that African feminism "negotiates rather than negates culture" (25), and Sembène's work exemplifies this principle: social and ethical critique emerges from within, not imposed externally.

Sembène's engagement with power is equally nuanced. Where colonial anthropology treated power as structural and monolithic, Sembène depicts its fluidity, mediation, and performativity. In Xala, El Hadji's impotence serves as both literal and symbolic evidence of authority devoid of substance, reflecting Achille Mbembe's insight that postcolonial power frequently manifests as "the signs of authority without its substance" (102). By demonstrating how hierarchies persist symbolically while failing socially, Sembène theorises power through narrative and observation, offering insights inaccessible to detached ethnography.

Narrative and cinematic techniques are central to his counter-anthropology. Dialogue, internal monologue, and collective deliberation produce social knowledge, while cinematic devices render social and spatial realities visible. Borom Sarret, for instance, portrays urban marginality and social stratification through framing and visual narrative, creating a visual anthropology that complements literary analysis. As Manthia Diawara notes, African cinema "emerges as a counter- discourse to colonial visual regimes" (12). Sembène's films extend the epistemic reach of his literature, producing knowledge through

both story and image.

Sembène's method is neither idealised nor uncritical. He recognises postcolonial distortions and internal contradictions: negotiation, resistance, and ethical deliberation coexist with elite corruption, moral compromise, and structural inequities. By depicting these complexities, Sembène produces a form of social theorising that is empirical, ethically engaged, and participatory. Literature and cinema, in his hands, become instruments for observing, critiquing, and theorising social life without erasing agency or historical consciousness.

In synthesising literature and film, Sembène demonstrates that African societies are intelligible not through distant observation but through immersive, ethical engagement. His counter- anthropological logic emphasises participation, historicity, and moral reflection, producing knowledge grounded in experience yet analytically rigorous. By challenging the epistemic authority of colonial anthropology and interrogating postcolonial hierarchies, Sembène establishes a model in which narrative functions as both method and theory, a means of understanding, theorising, and intervening in African social life.

Labour, Collective Life, and Colonial Power in God's Bits of Wood

In God's Bits of Wood, Sembène Ousmane situates African labour not as a passive instrument of colonial administration but as a dynamic arena of social, ethical, and historical negotiation. The railway strike at the centre of the narrative reveals how communal life, gender relations, and social hierarchies operate within ethical and relational frameworks, exposing the limitations of colonial anthropological models that treated workers as objects of control. As Talal Asad observes, anthropology under colonialism "was constructed within a field of power, serving administrative and political imperatives rather than simply describing social realities" (14). Sembène counters this logic, showing that labour is inseparable from social consciousness, collective action, and moral deliberation.

The strike is depicted not merely as economic resistance but as a communal event mobilising entire social networks. "The strike had ceased to be a matter of men alone; it had become the business of the whole community," Sembène writes, emphasising women's central role in sustaining collective effort (Sembène, God's Bits of Wood 98). This foregrounding of female agency challenges colonial ethnography and postcolonial stereotypes, which often imagined African labour as hierarchical, male-dominated, or passive. Women in the narrative are ethical actors, decision-makers, and organisers, shaping both the meaning and trajectory of the strike. In doing so, Sembène asserts that knowledge of social life emerges from participation rather than external observation.

Colonial social science frequently conceptualised labour in reductive, mechanistic terms, treating work as a function of necessity rather than as a site of social knowledge. Sembène disrupts this paradigm by illustrating how labour is embedded within kinship, solidarity, and ethical obligation. Individual actions resonate communally, reflecting a society in which agency is relational. Frantz Fanon observes that "the colonized intellectual discovers the reality of his society through action" (85), a principle enacted in the narrative as workers come to understand their social reality through engagement in collective struggle. The strike becomes both practical and epistemic, a space where knowledge and action converge.

Historical specificity is central to Sembène's depiction of labour. African workers are aware of systemic injustice, coordinating resistance in ways that challenge the colonial notion of timeless, unchanging societies. Murphy notes that Sembène "rejects the posture of detached observation in favour of ethical and political engagement" (3). The strike is not reactive; it is informed by ethical reflection, historical consciousness, and communal deliberation. Workers' struggles intersect with gender, religion, and local hierarchies, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of social life.

Gender relations are particularly significant in the strike. Women organise meetings, manage logistics, and sustain morale, showing that social knowledge is co-constructed. Their

participation underscores the principle that understanding collective life requires attending to gendered perspectives. Obioma Nnaemeka argues that African feminism "negotiates rather than negates culture" (25), a principle exemplified in Sembène's narrative: ethical and social critique emerges internally through negotiation, dialogue, and communal engagement.

Sembène also interrogates the colonial administration's instrumentalisation of labour. European authorities treated workers as objects of regulation and control, ignoring the moral and social dimensions of their lives. Sembène depicts strikers as conscious, organised actors capable of negotiating and resisting imposition. Labour, in his narrative, becomes a counter-anthropological site, integrating ethical deliberation, historical awareness, and collective agency.

The urban-rural and class dimensions of labour are central to the novel's epistemology. Migrant workers, townspeople, and rural families exist in interdependent networks, illustrating that economic action cannot be divorced from ethical and communal considerations. Colonial anthropology's reductive accounts fail to capture these entanglements, producing simplified, homogenised representations of African labour. Sembène's narrative, by contrast, presents a historically grounded and ethically informed social analysis, rooted in lived experience.

Power and authority within the community are also relational and contingent. Leadership is negotiated and accountable; decisions emerge from debate and consensus rather than hierarchy alone. Fanon's insight that authentic social understanding arises through participation rather than observation (85) resonates here: Sembène operationalises this principle, using narrative as a form of ethnography that captures the rhythms, conflicts, and deliberations of communal life.

Sembène's attention to everyday life, domestic spaces, and personal narratives enhances the counter-anthropological perspective. By integrating work, family, gender, and morality, he constructs an epistemic framework that challenges the totalising assumptions of colonial social science. Social knowledge, in this schema, is produced within, though, and for the community rather than imposed from an external, supposedly objective vantage point.

God's Bits of Wood exemplifies Sembène's counter-anthropological method. Labour is not a passive economic function but a site of collective knowledge, ethical reflection, and historical consciousness. Women's agency, communal deliberation, and ethical awareness underscore the narrative's participatory epistemology. Sembène produces a social anthropology grounded in African experience, demonstrating that understanding social life requires immersion, engagement, and reflection rather than detached observation. Through literature, he models a form of counter- anthropology that is both analytically rigorous and ethically attentive, offering enduring insights into the intersections of labour, gender, and social power under colonial rule.

Postcolonial Elites and the Anthropology of Failure in Xala

In Xala, Sembène Ousmane turns his counter-anthropological lens onto the postcolonial elite, exposing the persistence of colonial hierarchies under the guise of independence. Whereas colonial anthropology framed Africans as passive objects for observation, Sembène foregrounds those who wield power, revealing authority as performative, contested, and often hollow. The narrative satirises the moral and social impotence of elites, illustrating that political sovereignty does not automatically generate ethical, institutional, or social transformation. Achille Mbembe's observation that postcolonial power often manifests as "the signs of authority without its substance" resonates throughout the novel (102), highlighting the structural and relational dimensions of elite failure. Sembène's work thus constructs counter-anthropology not through external observation, but through intimate engagement with the ethical, relational, and historical dynamics of postcolonial authority.

Central to the narrative is El Hadji, whose impotence functions as both a literal and symbolic marker of postcolonial dysfunction. His condition embodies the elite's mimicry of

colonial structures: the pursuit of wealth, status, and ceremonial power without the ethical or social grounding necessary for legitimate authority. Sembène writes: "El Hadji was a man of means, of respect, of power; yet he could not honour the most intimate obligations of his own household" (Xala 45). Here, material accumulation is divorced from moral responsibility, illustrating that social power requires ethical, relational, and historically informed foundations.

The novel further interrogates the interplay between traditional authority, religion, and postcolonial bureaucracy. El Hadji's impotence exposes the hollowness of public rituals, the fragility of inherited norms, and the ethical bankruptcy of elites who reproduce colonial hierarchies uncritically. Postcolonial failure is shown not as individual weakness but as a systemic condition, emerging from the continuation of colonial epistemic frameworks and unexamined adoption of imported governance models. Sembène demonstrates that authority devoid of relational and ethical accountability collapses socially, even when it persists symbolically.

Gender is central to Sembène's critique of elite authority. Women function as moral arbiters, ethical interlocutors, and agents of accountability, revealing the contradictions and excesses of male elites. "The women of the household knew the laws of respect, of honour, of action—and they knew too when the man had failed in all" (Xala 88). By foregrounding female perspectives, Sembène contests epistemologies that historically silenced women, showing that ethical judgement, political responsibility, and social knowledge are inseparable. Postcolonial authority is relational: it exists in interaction with those it governs, and women are key to maintaining, contesting, or exposing its failures.

Sembène also scrutinises the performativity of status. Titles, wealth, and ceremonies are insufficient indicators of legitimate authority. El Hadji's interactions with colleagues, family, and friends reveal how appearances of power can mask moral and institutional weakness. As David Murphy notes, Sembène "demonstrates that social reality is understood and reproduced through action, not through the mere possession of power" (47). Through satire, the narrative exposes the disparity between performative authority and ethical substance, highlighting the relational logic that underpins genuine social legitimacy.

The broader social consequences of elite dysfunction are also central. The community is active, observing, critiquing, and negotiating authority. Ordinary citizens are neither passive nor silent; they interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist elite decisions. This participatory dynamic exemplifies Sembène's counter-anthropological methodology, where understanding social order arises from immersion in relational networks rather than detached observation. Fanon's insight that "the colonized intellectual discovers the reality of his society through action" (85) underscores this point: social knowledge is generated through interaction, negotiation, and ethical engagement, not formal hierarchies alone.

Public ritual and private morality intersect to reveal the entanglement of ethics and authority. El Hadji's impotence manifests across communal and domestic spaces, demonstrating that social legitimacy depends on both perception and performance. The novel's attention to granular details—the household, markets, ceremonies—illustrates Sembène's ethnographic precision. Ethical critique is embedded in narrative observation, enabling a counter-anthropology that reveals both elite failure and the resilience of social agency among ordinary citizens.

Religion functions similarly as a dynamic, negotiable domain. Conversion, ritual, and belief are entwined with social performance and political ambition. Where colonial anthropology represented religion as a static marker of culture, Sembène emphasises its contested, instrumental, and ethically interpreted dimensions. Xala thus illuminates the continuity between colonial epistemic frameworks and post-independence social hierarchies, showing that elite failure is produced structurally, relationally, and historically.

Satire is a critical tool in Sembène's approach. By highlighting contradictions, hypocrisies, and moral lapses, the narrative exposes elite dysfunction without reducing characters to caricature. Everyday interactions, ethical dilemmas, and communal responses

become instruments of social theory. The novel demonstrates that counter-anthropology need not be formal or academic: narrative, through satire and detail, can produce analytic insights into power, morality, and social cohesion.

Ultimately, Xala exemplifies Sembène's counter-anthropological critique of postcolonial society. By examining elite failure, relational authority, and ethical accountability, the novel interrogates the reproduction of colonial hierarchies under independence. Knowledge of social order emerges not from detached observation or symbolic authority but from immersion in communal life, attention to historical and moral context, and engagement with the ethical demands of everyday interaction. Postcolonial elites are not merely symbolic figures; their failings illuminate systemic, historical, and moral patterns shaping African social life. In this sense, Xala functions simultaneously as literature and as a form of social theory, revealing the relational, ethical, and historical complexities of power in postcolonial Africa.

Cinema as Counter-Anthropological Practice

Sembène Ousmane's engagement with cinema represents a deliberate extension of his counter- anthropological methodology, translating his literary interventions into visual and performative forms. Where colonial anthropology often depicted African urban and rural life as chaotic, static, or in need of regulation, Sembène's films foreground the agency, ethical deliberation, and relational networks of social actors. In Borom Sarret (1963), his first film, the urban poor of post- independence Dakar are neither objects of pity nor exoticised curiosities; they are complex, self- aware participants navigating economic necessity, moral obligation, and bureaucratic oppression. The narrative follows a cart driver, Borom Sarret, whose daily interactions with officials, clients, and the city itself reveal both the opacity of bureaucratic authority and the intricate interdependence of urban actors. In one pivotal scene, Borom Sarret attempts to assist a man who has lost his cart, only to be rebuffed by municipal authorities. Sembène's use of mise-en-scène— lingering on lines, offices, and passersby—renders the city a space of social contestation, demonstrating that understanding urban life requires immersion and relational observation rather than detached ethnographic judgment (Sembène, Borom Sarret 1963).

This logic of participatory observation extends to historical and ethical inquiry. In Ceddo (1977), Sembène explores resistance to the imposition of political and religious authority in precolonial Senegal, foregrounding the tension between communal autonomy and centralised power. The film depicts the Ceddo as active agents, negotiating loyalties, making strategic choices, and asserting ethical judgment in the face of coercion. Through dialogue, gesture, and collective action, Sembène emphasises the contested and dynamic nature of tradition, authority, and historical process, countering colonial representations that treated African religion and governance as fixed or static (Sembène, Ceddo 1977). Women, often marginalised in colonial accounts, emerge as central ethical actors, shaping outcomes through persuasion, dialogue, and strategic intervention. As Nnaemeka observes, African women negotiate social, cultural, and moral terrains, producing change through relational and ethical engagement (25). Sembène's cinematic lens captures this agency, reinforcing the principle that social understanding requires participation, not detachment.

Moolaadé (2002) represents the culmination of Sembène's cinematic counter-anthropology, addressing contemporary ethical dilemmas within rural societies. Collé Ardo invokes the protective power of moolaadé to shelter girls from female genital cutting, creating a site of moral, social, and communal negotiation. Where colonial anthropology depicted such practices as static cultural norms, Sembène presents them as socially and historically contested, illustrating that morality, authority, and tradition are relational and dynamically negotiated. The film's visual framing alternates between communal assemblies, intimate dialogues, and symbolic spaces, rendering both collective and individual ethical reasoning visible (Sembène, Moolaadé 2002). Women are central to these processes, exercising moral authority, contesting patriarchal norms, and shaping social outcomes.

Ethical legitimacy, Sembène demonstrates, is not inherent in formal leadership or tradition; it is co-produced through relational engagement and moral courage.

Across these films, Sembène develops a coherent cinematic method that mirrors the epistemic commitments of his literature. The camera functions simultaneously as observer and participant, attending to relational dynamics, historical context, and ethical deliberation. Urban marginality, historical resistance, and contemporary ethical dilemmas are depicted not through abstraction or distant analysis but through immersive representation, allowing viewers to perceive the interdependence of agency, morality, and social structure. In doing so, Sembène's cinema produces knowledge that is historically grounded, relationally informed, and ethically attentive, challenging the assumptions of colonial and postcolonial frameworks alike.

In Borom Sarret, urban space itself becomes an ethnographic lens. The protagonist's navigation of Dakar illuminates the structural constraints imposed by bureaucracy and inequality, revealing social interconnections that defy simplistic classification. The failures and compromises he experiences are not personal defects but reflections of broader systemic and ethical conditions. Similarly, Ceddo portrays historical processes as contingent and negotiated, demonstrating that authority, conversion, and communal loyalty are ethically and politically mediated. In both films, the interplay of individual choice and collective action foregrounds a social epistemology grounded in participation, highlighting the relational production of knowledge.

Moolaadé extends this logic into contemporary rural contexts, linking ethical dilemmas to broader historical and social structures. The narrative situates contested practices within a continuum of communal negotiation, moral reflection, and historical consciousness. Sembène's attention to visual detail—the framing of dialogue, the staging of public deliberation, the intimate spaces of moral choice—renders social knowledge both visible and analytically intelligible. Gender, morality, and authority intersect, showing that ethical decision-making emerges within, rather than imposed upon, social structures. The films collectively demonstrate that counter-anthropology is as much an epistemic strategy as a narrative one, producing insights inaccessible to detached observation or formal analysis.

The films also emphasise the continuity between social, moral, and historical dimensions of African life. Authority, power, and social norms are constantly negotiated and contested. By privileging relational perspectives, ethical reasoning, and historical consciousness, Sembène constructs a cinema that is simultaneously participatory, analytic, and morally attuned. Urban marginality, communal resistance, and ethical dilemmas are not abstract phenomena; they are lived, experienced, and observed from within the social fabric.

Sembène's cinema thus functions as a mode of social theory. The camera's gaze is neither neutral nor external; it immerses the viewer in social processes, foregrounding dialogue, ethical decision- making, and collective action. In doing so, his films transform visual storytelling into a methodology for producing knowledge, extending the principles of counter-anthropology pioneered in his literature. As Manthia Diawara observes, African cinema "challenges the colonial visual order, producing knowledge through the rhythms, conflicts, and ethical engagements of everyday life" (12). Borom Sarret, Ceddo, and Moolaadé exemplify this principle, demonstrating that cinematic representation can generate insights into relational, historical, and ethical dimensions of social life, emphasizing the interplay of individual agency, communal responsibility, and structural context.

By integrating ethical reflection, historical consciousness, and participatory observation, Sembène's films establish that social knowledge is inseparable from engagement with lived experience. Urban spaces, historical struggles, and contemporary ethical dilemmas are intelligible only through immersive narrative, attentive observation, and relational participation. Cinema, in Sembène's hands, becomes a counter-anthropological tool that challenges colonial epistemic authority while producing socially grounded, historically informed, and ethically responsible knowledge. In doing so, his visual narratives offer enduring models for understanding African society on its own terms,

demonstrating that immersion, reflection, and relationality are essential to capturing the complexity of social life.

Gender, Tradition, and Moral Agency in Sembène's Works

In Sembène Ousmane's literature and cinema, gender functions as both a lens and a site of social and ethical contestation. Women are never passive or symbolic figures; they are active agents shaping communal decisions, ethical norms, and social knowledge. Colonial and postcolonial anthropologies often rendered African women invisible or instrumentalised them as bearers of tradition. Sembène directly challenges these reductions, portraying women as central to ethical negotiation, moral authority, and social transformation.

In God's Bits of Wood, women are indispensable to the railway strike, demonstrating organisational acumen, moral courage, and collective responsibility. Sembène observes that "The strike had ceased to be a matter of men alone; it had become the business of the whole community" (98). The narrative illustrates that social knowledge emerges from collaborative action rather than detached observation, foregrounding women's labour—both domestic and public—as integral to sustaining the community and negotiating ethical crises. Their participation underscores Sembène's commitment to a counter-anthropological epistemology: knowledge is produced from within social life, through engagement, reflection, and relational deliberation.

Sembène further explores the intersection of tradition and reform, particularly when practices implicate gendered authority. In Moolaadé, female genital cutting is neither presented as immutable nor unquestionable. Collé Ardo's invocation of moolaadé to shelter girls exemplifies tradition as a contested ethical field: "This protection is older than the rules you enforce" (112). Rather than imposing external judgment, Sembène depicts tradition as historically mediated, socially negotiated, and ethically flexible. Women emerge as principal interpreters and enforcers of moral practice, challenging patriarchal structures while simultaneously asserting communal responsibility.

Historical consciousness informs these portrayals. In Ceddo, women participate in deliberations over political and religious authority, shaping decisions that affect collective futures. Their agency demonstrates that knowledge of social life must account for temporal, relational, and ethical dimensions. Colonial anthropology, by contrast, often reduced women to symbolic custodians of culture, ignoring their active role in shaping historical outcomes (Sembène, Ceddo 45). Sembène's narratives insist that moral authority is exercised through communal negotiation, dialogue, and individual courage rather than through formal status or hierarchical position.

Postcolonial critique also animates Sembène's depiction of women. In Xala, female characters expose the hypocrisy and impotence of male elites, illustrating that ethical accountability is relational. They serve as moral interlocutors, highlighting how authority divorced from responsibility collapses. Murphy notes that Sembène's narratives "foreground ethical deliberation as central to social life, highlighting the interdependence of action, morality, and communal knowledge" (47). Women's interventions are both ethical and epistemic, revealing the mechanisms of social power and the limits of authority within postcolonial hierarchies.

Cinema amplifies these themes through visual and performative strategies. In Moolaadé, close-up shots, spatial arrangements, and communal gatherings render women's deliberation and action visible, making ethical and social agency analytically legible. Sembène's camera maps relational dynamics, capturing the negotiation of authority, the moral stakes of decisions, and the contested nature of tradition (Diawara 12). Visual storytelling thus becomes a tool of counter-anthropological knowledge production, demonstrating that ethical agency is inseparable from participation and observation within lived social worlds.

Sembène consistently situates moral action within networks of social obligation, historical memory, and collective responsibility. In God's Bits of Wood, women coordinate

the strike through communal solidarity, balancing ethical deliberation with practical organisation to navigate colonial oppression. In Moolaadé, Collé Ardo's protection of girls exemplifies historically informed ethical intervention, negotiating tradition, social cohesion, and individual rights simultaneously. In both cases, moral agency emerges not in isolation but through relational embeddedness, reinforcing Sembène's critique of detached anthropological observation.

Ethical dilemmas permeate Sembène's depictions of female agency. Women must navigate competing demands: fidelity to tradition, responsibility toward family, and pursuit of justice. Sembène avoids simplistic resolutions, emphasising the contested and negotiated nature of ethical action. This approach critiques both colonial anthropological simplifications and postcolonial romanticisations of African social life, presenting women's decision-making as historically situated, relational, and morally complex.

By centring gender, Sembène reconceptualises authority, knowledge, and tradition. Women's agency demonstrates that ethical legitimacy is socially constructed, relational, and contingent rather than inherited or imposed. Nnaemeka observes that African feminist praxis "produces knowledge and effect through negotiation and relational engagement rather than direct confrontation" (25). Sembène's narratives exemplify this principle, showing that moral agency and social knowledge are mutually constitutive: women's actions generate insight, shape communal outcomes, and contest both patriarchal and colonial epistemologies.

Across his works, Sembène constructs a counter-anthropological vision in which gender, tradition, and moral agency intersect. Women's engagement in social, economic, and ethical spheres illuminates the relational and historically contingent nature of African social life. Their interventions produce knowledge, influence communal decisions, and challenge colonial and postcolonial misrepresentations. Literature and cinema together foreground women as co- producers of social reality, demonstrating that understanding African society requires attention to historically situated, socially embedded moral actors.

Sembène's treatment of gender thus exemplifies the ethical, participatory, and historically conscious principles of his broader counter-anthropological project. Tradition is neither static nor deterministic; it is a terrain for negotiation, moral reasoning, and social action. Moral agency emerges within networks of obligation and historical awareness, illustrating that knowledge of social life is inseparable from the ethical deliberations of those who inhabit it. By highlighting women's interventions in social, political, and ethical domains, Sembène provides an epistemology attentive to relationality, historical consciousness, and participatory engagement.

In sum, Sembène's works foreground women as agents of ethical deliberation, communal participation, and historical insight. Across literature and cinema, gender functions as a site where morality, social knowledge, and authority converge. By centring women's agency, Sembène dismantles colonial and postcolonial misrepresentations, showing that ethical and social understanding arises from negotiation, relational engagement, and immersion in lived experience.

His narratives establish that moral authority, tradition, and social knowledge are dynamically intertwined, producing a counter-anthropological framework capable of capturing the complexity, contingency, and relationality of African social life.

Religion, Ethics, and Social Critique in Sembène's Narrative Universe

In Sembène Ousmane's literature and cinema, religion operates as both a site of ethical negotiation and a lens for social critique. Where colonial anthropology often reduced African religious practices to static, superstitious, or primitive phenomena, Sembène presents them as embedded within social life, historically contingent, and relationally mediated. Religion in his works is inseparable from moral deliberation, communal authority, and the negotiation of power, revealing that ethical and social understanding emerges from practice and participation rather than external observation.

In Ceddo, the imposition of Islam on resistant communities illustrates the interplay of religion, authority, and agency. Colonial anthropologists often interpreted conversion as inevitable or deterministic, ignoring the ethical reasoning and social negotiation involved. Sembène's depiction foregrounds the community's active engagement: villagers interpret, contest, and sometimes resist religious change, asserting moral and social judgement in the face of coercion (Sembène, Ceddo 45). Religion is therefore neither passive nor imposed; it is a domain where historical context, collective deliberation, and individual agency converge.

The ethical dimension of religion is central to Sembène's narrative strategy. In Moolaadé, Collé Ardo invokes moolaadé to protect girls from female genital cutting, demonstrating that traditional or religious frameworks can produce morally transformative outcomes. Her action underscores that religious authority is not static or ritualistic but a resource for ethical engagement: "This protection is older than the rules you enforce" (Sembène, Moolaadé 112). By highlighting relational, historically situated, and participatory ethical practice, Sembène challenges colonial assumptions that equated African religion with obedience or cultural backwardness.

Postcolonial contexts are equally scrutinised. In Xala, ritual and religious observance coexist with corruption, moral failure, and performative authority. El Hadji's impotence symbolizes the hollowness of social and religious authority divorced from ethical accountability: "El Hadji was a man of means, of respect, of power; yet he could not honour the most intimate obligations of his own household" (Sembène, Xala 45). Through such symbolism, Sembène links religious practice to social responsibility, demonstrating that legitimacy requires relational and ethical grounding as much as ceremonial adherence.

Sembène consistently situates religion within broader networks of ethical, social, and political relations. Across his works, moral authority is enacted through collective deliberation, historical consciousness, and individual courage. Characters navigate dilemmas in ways that reveal the relational basis of ethics: decision-making is inseparable from social embeddedness. Murphy observes that Sembène "foregrounds ethical deliberation as central to social life, highlighting the interdependence of action, morality, and communal knowledge" (47). Religion functions not as an imposed code but as a medium through which social knowledge and ethical practice are realized.

Gender further shapes Sembène's exploration of religious authority. Women frequently act as ethical arbiters, negotiating religious and social norms to protect vulnerable members of the community. In Moolaadé, female characters mobilize both traditional and religious authority to resist harmful practices, illustrating the participatory and relational nature of ethical power. Sembène's attention to women counters both colonial and patriarchal epistemologies, showing that moral authority often resides in actors historically marginalized in anthropological discourse (Nnaemeka 25). Religion, ethics, and gender intersect to reveal complex forms of agency and social accountability.

Historical consciousness is a recurring theme in Sembène's treatment of religion. Practices such as conversion, ritual observance, and moral instruction are embedded within economic, political, and social networks. In Ceddo, resistance to religious imposition intersects with political autonomy, communal cohesion, and ethical reasoning (Sembène, Ceddo 45). Similarly, in Moolaadé, Collé Ardo's protection of girls addresses both moral and social imperatives, demonstrating that religious authority is relational, contextually situated, and historically informed.

Cinema amplifies these insights through visual storytelling. In Moolaadé, spatial framing, ensemble scenes, and close-ups capture ethical deliberation in action, emphasizing participation, relationality, and moral tension. The visual composition makes visible the negotiation of authority, the stakes of decision-making, and the contested nature of tradition. As Diawara notes, African cinema "produces knowledge through the rhythms, conflicts, and ethical engagements of everyday life" (12). Sembène's films translate his literary counter-anthropology into visual form, retaining historical, ethical, and social depth.

Sembène's integration of religion, ethics, and social critique extends to postcolonial

scrutiny. Rituals, religious institutions, and symbolic authority are interrogated for their alignment—or misalignment—with social responsibility. In both literature and film, religious symbols and practices are evaluated ethically: legitimacy depends not solely on performance or adherence but on relational accountability, communal negotiation, and historical awareness. Through this lens, religion becomes a mechanism for interrogating colonial legacies, postcolonial hierarchies, and moral agency.

Ultimately, Sembène positions religion as a central site for understanding African social life. Religious practice is historically situated, ethically mediated, and socially embedded, intersecting with gender, political authority, and communal responsibility. By depicting contested practices, negotiation, and resistance, Sembène demonstrates that African moral and social knowledge cannot be apprehended through abstraction or detached observation. Religious authority is relational, dynamic, and participatory—a reflection of the broader principles of his counter- anthropological approach.

In conclusion, religion in Sembène Ousmane's narrative universe functions as an ethical resource, a site of social critique, and a medium for participatory knowledge production. Across literature and cinema, moral deliberation, agency, and historical consciousness converge to produce a nuanced understanding of African social life. By foregrounding the relational, contested, and morally charged dimensions of religious authority, Sembène constructs a counter-anthropological framework in which ethical, social, and historical insights are inseparable. His works reveal that understanding society requires immersion in lived experience, attention to communal negotiation, and engagement with morally grounded agency. Religion, ethics, and social critique are thus mutually constitutive in Sembène's oeuvre, producing an integrated vision of African societies as self-reflective, socially complex, and ethically responsive.

II. Conclusion

Synthesis and Counter-Anthropology

Sembène Ousmane's literary and cinematic works offer a profound exploration of African social life, revealing the ethical, relational, and historical dimensions that often elude detached observation. Across his novels and films, social life is depicted not as a static or homogenous entity but as dynamic, contested, and morally infused. Through his narratives, African communities are shown negotiating power, authority, and tradition from within, revealing agency where colonial and postcolonial frameworks have often imposed reductionist interpretations. The vibrancy of everyday life, the centrality of moral reasoning, and the participatory nature of social action emerge as recurring threads, underscoring the depth and complexity of African societies.

In examining labour, collective action, and social solidarity, Sembène demonstrates that knowledge emerges through participation. The railway strike in God's Bits of Wood, for instance, illustrates that work is never merely economic; it is an ethical and social practice that connects families, communities, and historical memory. Women, in particular, are shown to be essential actors, coordinating, mediating, and sustaining the ethical core of collective life. Their involvement challenges conventional assumptions about authority and social knowledge, highlighting the relational and co-constitutive nature of agency. Through these narratives, it becomes clear that understanding social life requires immersion, attention to daily interactions, and recognition of the moral stakes embedded in collective action.

Sembène also scrutinises postcolonial authority, exposing the gap between formal power and ethical legitimacy. In Xala, the post-independence elite is portrayed as performative and hollow, demonstrating that wealth, status, or ritual observance alone cannot sustain meaningful leadership. Authority, Sembène shows, is earned through accountability, ethical responsibility, and responsiveness to communal needs. These depictions reveal a society negotiating its own history and moral expectations, where the failings of leaders are made evident not merely through satire but through the lived realities

of those around them. Sembène invites the reader to witness the relational foundations of power, highlighting the ethical dimensions often overlooked in conventional analyses.

Cinema allows Sembène to extend this exploration into the visual realm, transforming ethical and social knowledge into immersive experiences. Films like Borom Sarret capture the rhythms of urban life, revealing marginality, negotiation, and the human complexity of daily survival. Ceddo examines historical resistance and the negotiation of religious and political authority, showing how moral and communal reasoning shape outcomes. Moolaadé foregrounds ethical dilemmas within contemporary rural life, highlighting women's agency and moral courage in protecting the vulnerable. Across these films, Sembène demonstrates that observing, participating, and reflecting on social life are inseparable processes, producing knowledge that is rich, nuanced, and historically situated.

Gender remains central to Sembène's counter-anthropology, revealing that moral authority and social knowledge are often relational and co-constructed. Women emerge consistently as ethical arbiters, shaping the moral and social order through negotiation, courage, and participation. Their interventions illuminate both the strengths and vulnerabilities of communal life, showing that decisions are rarely individualistic and that the ethical fabric of society is woven through dialogue, care, and shared responsibility. In both literature and film, the actions of women reveal a deeper understanding of social cohesion, authority, and relational ethics, challenging traditional and colonial assumptions about passivity and hierarchy.

Religion and tradition are treated similarly: neither static nor absolute, they are depicted as living frameworks through which ethical and social reasoning are exercised. Sembène portrays religion as embedded in communal life, intersecting with morality, history, and social responsibility. Practices and beliefs are dynamic, shaped by negotiation, dialogue, and ethical deliberation. Characters engage with their faith and tradition not simply to follow rules but to make decisions that protect the vulnerable, assert communal norms, and mediate tensions. This approach humanises the social, showing that African societies are active participants in shaping their own ethical and moral universe.

Across his works, Sembène demonstrates that social knowledge cannot be extracted through observation alone. Rather, it emerges from engagement, reflection, and ethical immersion. He presents a vision of society in which history, morality, relational responsibility, and agency converge, producing insight that is both intimate and socially grounded. His literature and cinema offer readers and viewers a way to understand the complexities of African life from within, emphasising participation, moral reasoning, and relational awareness. Social realities are revealed in dialogue, interaction, and collective effort, offering profound lessons for how knowledge of human life can be both generated and applied.

Ultimately, Sembène Ousmane's oeuvre affirms the capacity of African societies to theorise, critique, and act upon their own realities. Literature and cinema become instruments not just for storytelling, but for understanding, ethical reflection, and social analysis. By centring everyday life, moral deliberation, gendered agency, and relational authority, Sembène produces a vision of society that is immersive, ethically engaged, and historically aware. His works demonstrate that understanding Africa's social, moral, and political complexities requires listening, observing, and participating with attention to nuance, relationality, and human experience.

In reflecting on Sembène's contributions, it becomes clear that his works transcend the boundaries of literature and film. They offer a methodology for engaging with social life, highlighting how knowledge emerges from embedded observation, ethical reasoning, and communal participation. He reveals that the African social world is not passive or predetermined but dynamic, self- reflective, and capable of transformation. Through his voice, the reader or viewer comes to appreciate the moral, historical, and relational dimensions of everyday life, where ethical reasoning, collective action, and relational authority define the contours of society. Sembène's vision, ultimately, celebrates human

agency, ethical responsibility, and the possibilities of understanding social life from within.

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