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OUSMANE SEMBENE

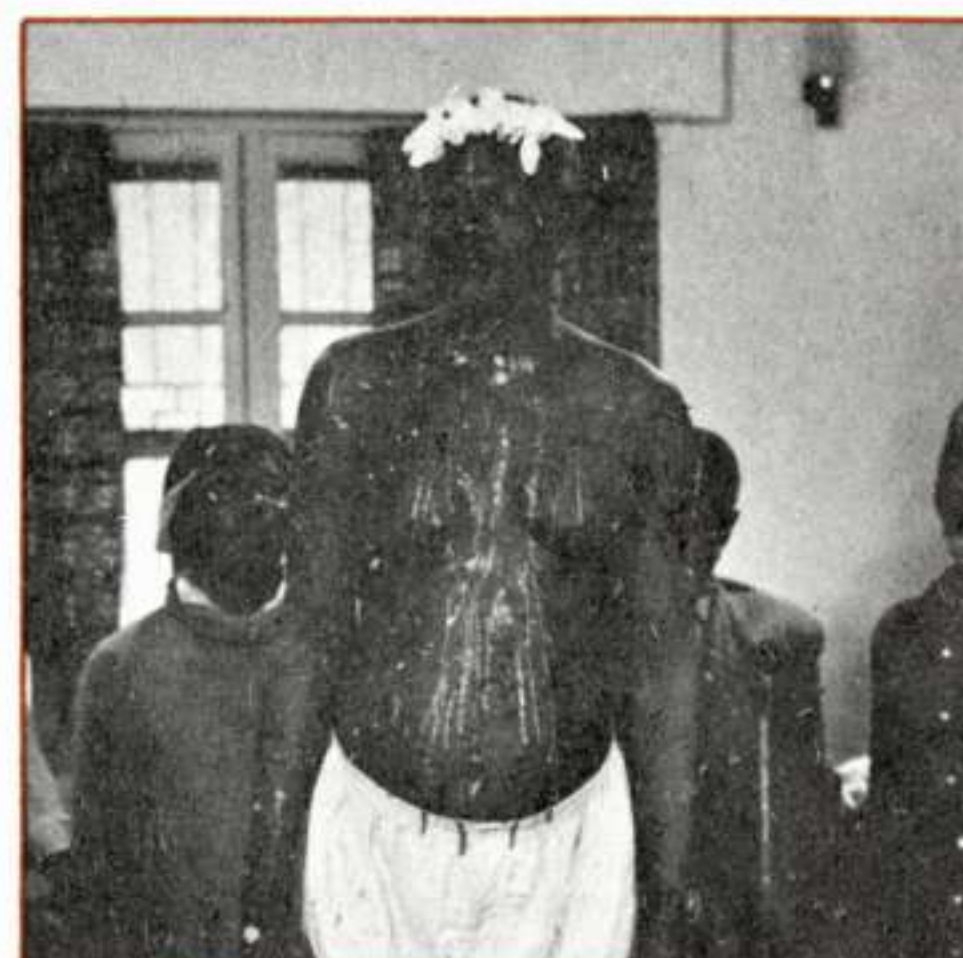
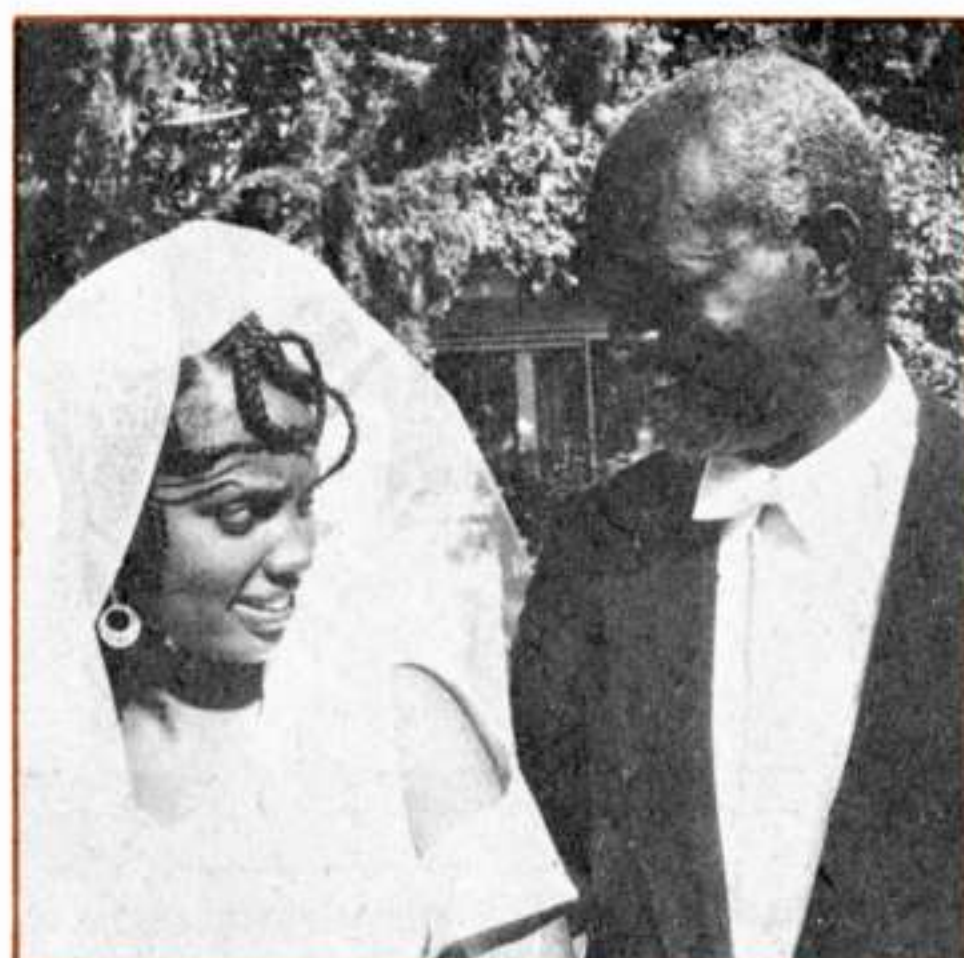


XALA

"XALA is the work of one of the most remarkable artists in the world, the Senegalese novelist—filmmaker Ousmane Sembene."

—Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*

New Yorker Films, 43 West 61st Street,
New York, N.Y. 10023 212-247-6110



OUSMANE SEMBENE'S XALA

"What one hand removes, another can put back."—A marabout nullifying a curse in *Xala*.

Xala (pronounced ha-la), Ousmane Sembene's fourth feature film, is also his first to achieve the distinction of being censored in his own country (the print distributed by New Yorker Films, however, is complete and uncut). Although one cannot condone this action, one can certainly understand it. *Xala* seems calculated to give nightmares to the ruling class of Senegal—or of nearly any emerging African nation, for that matter. Forsaking the easier targets of European exploitation and racism that characterized *Black Girl* and *Emitali*, Sembene here zeroes in on a far touchier subject: the myth of African independence, the wholesale blackfacing of white colonial policies by African leaders pompously declaring themselves to be "liberators."

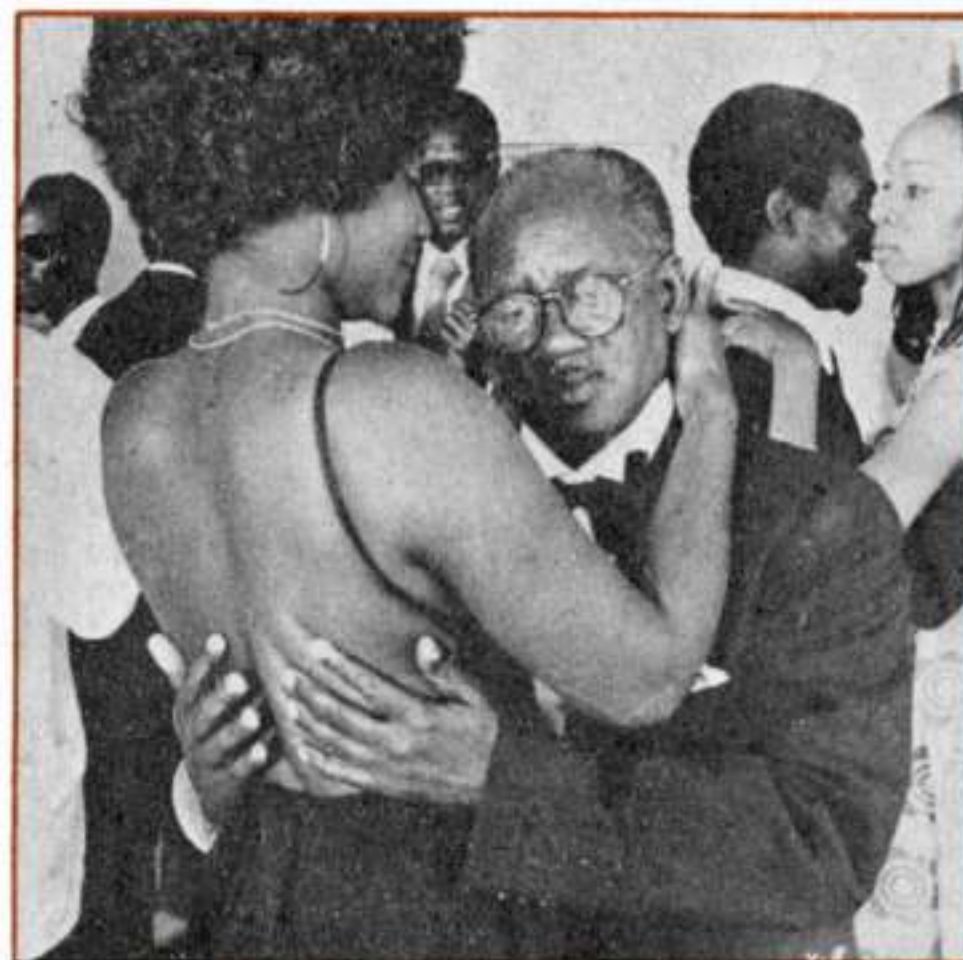
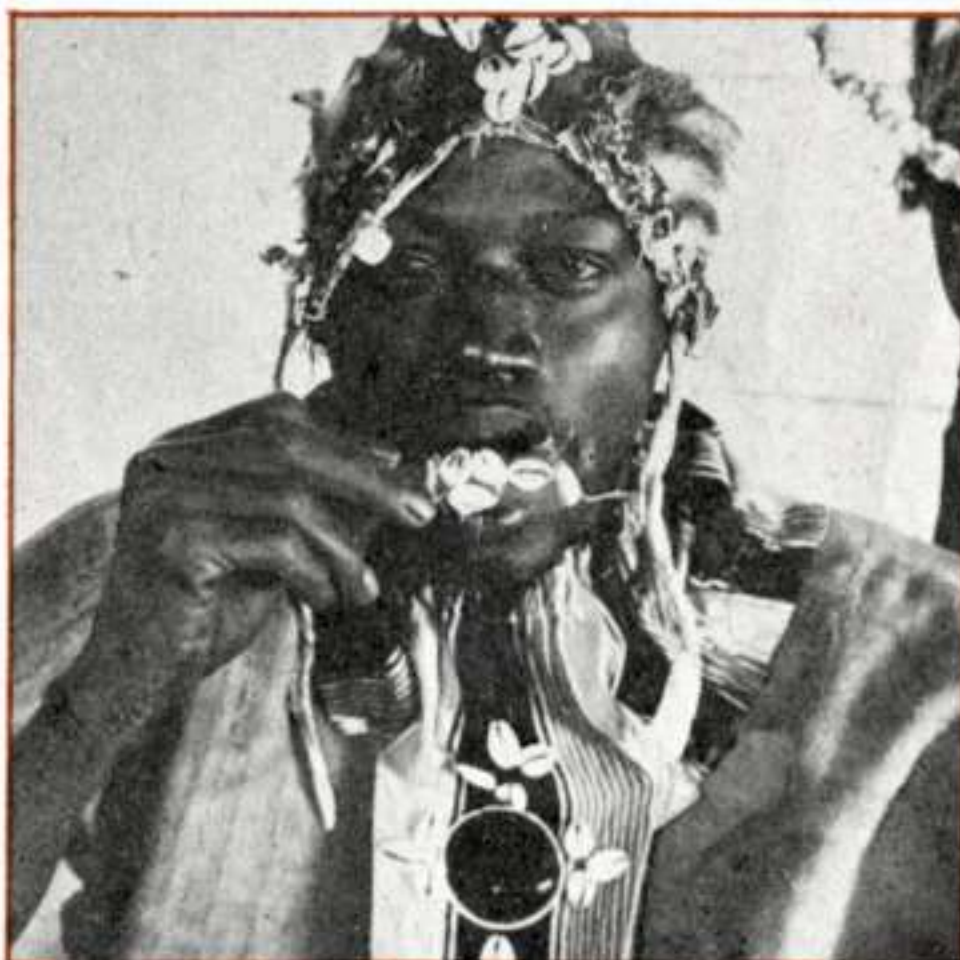
As is often the case with the most excruciating social criticism, *Xala* is a satire—and quite a funny and savage one, too. "Africa is a land of contrasts," as textbooks and official documentaries are so fond of declaring. But Sembene goes them one better. The Africa we see in *Xala* is a surreal crazy-quilt of native superstitions and white status symbols, an illegitimate freak conceived under a full moon by a French bureaucrat and the daughter of a witch doctor. The film opens with black dignitaries in tuxedos and limousines suavely taking over the Chamber of Commerce while a wild crowd of dancers and barebreasted girls lends support with bloodcurdling screams on the steps outside. The film's central character proudly carries a briefcase, speaks French rather than the native Wolof, drinks only bottled water imported from Europe, and can't sleep without the air conditioner on, but he also has three wives and goes running to a variety of marabouts, soothsayers, and charm-dispensers as soon as trouble strikes. Even the Star Band of Dakar is composed of a gleaming saxophone, African drums, an electric guitar, and a native chanter. And so it goes, until an amazed and zootsuited

pickpocket finally emerges as one of the most respected members of the community.

We first see El Hadji Abdou Kaber Beye, the hero of the tale, at the height of his career. His thriving import business has earned him a place in the newly-elected, all-African Chamber of Commerce. He is about to crown his success with a third wife, a beautiful young girl no older than his eldest daughter. But on the wedding night, disaster strikes; the self-assured El Hadji cannot consummate the marriage. Someone has evidently slapped him with the *Xala*, a curse rendering its victim impotent. Who could do this thing to El Hadji? One of his jealous senior wives? His radical, disapproving daughter? Some old, already-forgotten enemy?

From this point on, it is only a matter of time until El Hadji's affairs crumble into ruin. It seems as if the whole world knows of his conjugal problems. While he runs around emptying his wallet on potions and panaceas, El Hadji's business declines and finally goes under. Foreclosed, deserted by his young bride, clutching handfuls of charms, his checks ricocheting all over Senegal, he is finally drummed out of the Chamber of Commerce as a disgrace to the business community. El Hadji's impotence is mirrored in a group of wandering beggars and cripples, whose path eventually crosses his in a surprising and shocking conclusion, dutifully censored in the Senegalese Republic.

By the end of the film, El Hadji's impotence has grown much greater than just an inability to please his sulking young bride. It is the impotence of Senegal and all young African nations, an impotence which comes from a dependence on white technology, an impotence which has failed to remove the class imbalances and bureaucratic paralysis that have ruled Africa for over a hundred years. The charms and fetishes which El Hadji totes around are ultimately more real than the technological fetishism on which African nations build their Third World sand-castles. As one of Sembene's countrymen commented, "It is true. All of Senegal has the *Xala*."



THE DIRECTOR

Ousmane Sembene, the director of *XALA*, is the father of African Cinema. He was born in 1923 in a village in Senegal and spent his youth as a fisherman on the Casamance coast. In 1944, as a sharp-shooter in the ranks of Lattre's army, he landed in France. After his discharge, he became a dock worker in Marseilles, an active militant in French labor unions, and a participant in the cultural movement of African students. During this time, he taught himself to read and write French, and toward the end of the fifties, published his first novel *Le Docker Noir*, about the life of African emigres in France. Sembene's subsequent fiction established him as an African writer of international repute. Among his works are: *O! Pays, Mon Beau Peuple*, *Le Bouts du Bois de Dieu*, *L'Harmattan*, *Voltaïque* and *Xala* (to be published in this country in 1976 by Lawrence Hill & Company).

In 1960, Sembene decided to turn to film-making in order to deal imaginatively with the problems of African society. Unable to obtain apprenticeship in Paris, he went to Russia, where he studied and worked under Mark Donskoi. Upon his return to Africa he began making films. Sembene made four shorts: *SONRAI EMPIRE* (1962), *BOROM SARRET* (1963), *NYAYE* (1964) and *TAUW* (1969). *BOROM SARRET* won the Tours award and *NYAYE* won the Locarno award.

Sembene directed his first feature, *BLACK GIRL*, in 1965, followed by *MANDABI* in 1968 and *EMITAI* in 1972. *BLACK GIRL* won the Prix Jean Vigo and *MANDABI* was shown at the Seventh New York Film Festival.

Films by Ousmane Sembene distributed by New Yorker Films:

BOROM SARRET (1963)
BLACK GIRL (1965)
TAUW (1969)
EMITAI (1972)
XALA (1974)

COMMENTS

"*XALA*, Ousmane Sembene's gentle angry fable about the rise and fall of a black middle-class businessman in a newly independent African state that looks like Sembene's own Senegal. The director's sophistication as a filmmaker never upstages the comic simplicity of his moral lesson, which is told directly, often with great humor, and without condescension. Mr. Sembene is the first black African filmmaker to win the attention of the international film distributors. Now he must win the attention of international audiences, which he deserves."

—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*

"Sembene's greatest skill is his ability to evoke effectively the exotic ambience of his country which is excitingly unfamiliar to most of us."

—San Francisco Examiner

"Of course, the real government of Senegal partially censored this brave and wise film. The actors are wonderful, especially the women who play El Hadji's first two wives—ladies of magisterial personality, social shrewdness and sexual pride. The wedding sequence in *XALA* makes the one in *GODFATHER I* look like a wedding party at MacDonald's. This allegory of impotence in the body politic shows Sembene on his way to becoming an African Molière."

—Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*

CREDITS

Written and Directed by: Ousmane Sembene from his novel, *Xa/a*.

Produced by: Societe Nationale de Cinematographique/
Film Domireew

Photography by: Georges Caristan

Edited by: Florence Eymon

Sound by: El Hadji Mbow

Production Manager: Paulin S. Vieyra

CAST

El Hadji Abdoukader Beye: Thierno Leye

Adja Assatou, first wife: Seun Samb

Aram, second wife: Younouss Seye

Rama: Miriam Niamg

Gorgui, the old beggar: Douta Seck

Salesgirl/secretary: Fatim Diagne

The client: Moustapha Toure

The chauffeur: Ilimane Sagnan

The President: Makhouredia Gueye

The Minister: Abdoulaye Seck

Deputy Minister: Doudou Gueye

The banker: Farba Sarr

With the participation of the beggars of Dakar.

1975 Cannes Film Festival

1975 New York Film Festival

1975 Moscow Film Festival

1975 San Francisco Museum of Art

1975 Rotterdam Film Festival

1975 Philadelphia Film Festival

Running Time: 123 minutes. Color

In Wolof and French with English subtitles

A New Yorker Films Release

RENTAL INFORMATION

Classroom rate: \$125

("Classroom showing" is defined here as a one-time showing in a classroom of 30 or less students, where there is no admission charge or advertising of any kind.)

Unrestricted rate: \$200

(An "unrestricted showing" is any single exhibition in an auditorium of not more than 300 seats and where there is no admission charge.

Admission rate: \$250 vs. 50% of the gross receipts.

For 16mm. bookings, please add \$6 for shipping, handling and insurance charges.

Apply for 35mm. rates.

For 35mm. showings, exhibitor pays airfreight or surface charges both ways.



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