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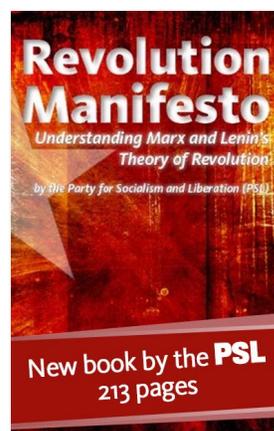
Ousmane Sembene: Revolutionary African artist

By Travis Wilkerson | Jun 29, 2007

The writer is an award-winning film director and PSL member in Los Angeles. His films include the Sundance Film Festival selections "An Injury to One" (2002) on the lynching of IWW organizer Frank Little and "Who Killed Cock Robin?" (2005).

Ousmane Sembene died last week at his home in Dakar, Senegal. He was 84. Despite being born into extremely humble conditions in colonial Africa, Sembene rose to become one of the key figures of African literature and the founder of its cinema.

Sembene was born in 1923, in Casamance, Senegal, the son of a fisherman. Senegal, at that time, was a French



Revisiting the theories of the state first developed by Marx, Engels and especially Lenin in his work "The State and Revolution."

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colony.

In 1936, the young Sembene was expelled from middle school for “indiscipline” and would never resume his formal education. A proneness to seasickness left him unable to pursue his father’s trade.



Ousmane Sembene

And so Sembene traveled to Dakar, Senegal’s capital city, where he worked as an apprentice mechanic and bricklayer. He also commenced his self-education, reading broadly and voraciously—French novels as well as comic books. In the segregated cinemas of Dakar, Sembene Ousmane discovered cinema.

In 1944, as a nominal French citizen, Sembene was amongst the tens of thousands of Africans drafted into active duty by the Free French forces who were fighting to liberate France from Nazi occupation. He returned to Senegal at the conclusion of the war.

Colonial Africa was pulsing with anti-colonial sentiment and political unrest. As Sembene recalled in an interview with the U.K. Independent: “In the army we saw those who considered themselves our masters naked, in tears, some cowardly or ignorant ... when a white soldier asked me to write a letter for him, it was a revelation—I thought Europeans knew how to write. The war demystified the colonizer; the veil fell.”

In 1946, Sembene joined the construction workers' trade union and helped organize the first general workers' strike in Senegal's history. The strike paralyzed the colonial economy for a month and marked the beginning of the nationalist anti-colonial struggle in French Africa. The events of that year would also have a profound, deeply politicizing effect upon the duration of Sembene's life.

Life shaped by politics

Senegal's economy was left in tatters by the war. An unemployed Sembene left Dakar for France in 1947. He would live there until 1960, the year Senegal gained its political independence.

While working on the docks in Marseilles, Sembene joined the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) the largest and strongest left-wing union federation in postwar France. In his limited free time, Sembene read anything on Marxism he could find and attended workshops and seminars on political theory. He joined the French Communist Party in 1950.

Sembene broke his back one year later while unloading a ship. During his long recovery, he immersed himself in learning, roaming public libraries, museums, and theater halls, and attending seminars on Marxism and communism while continuing his prolific reading.

Sembene also deepened his political activity. He

participated in the protest movements organized by the French Communist Party against the colonial war in Indochina (1953) and the Korean War (1950-1953). He also supported the Algerian National Liberation Front in its struggle for independence from France (1954-1962), and he vigorously protested the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs in the United States in 1953.

Under the deep influence of all these factors, Ousmane Sembene soon commenced his literary career. By 1960, he had already written his third novel and first masterpiece: "God's Bits of Wood." The novel, which depicts the 1947 anti-colonial general strike, is brimming with a Marxist outlook and represents a radical break with the bourgeois European novel.

From the beginning, Sembene wanted to write African novels for Africans themselves, radically overturning colonial cultural paradigms. But the scope of illiteracy among Sembene's intended audience soon left him frustrated.

Because of the Soviet Union's policy of international solidarity with Africans, Sembene was given an opportunity to study filmmaking in Moscow and he seized it. In 1962, Sembene spent a year learning cinematography at the Gorki Studios. At the end of the year, he returned to Senegal with his new knowledge and an old Soviet camera.

At the age of 40 in 1963, he produced his first short film: the astonishing "Borom Saret," about a horse-cart driver living in abjection in the shanties that ring Dakar. The

film was the first ever made in Africa by a black African. Made with stunningly humble means, the extraordinary work brought instant attention to Sembene.

Three years later, he produced his first feature, the widely acclaimed “Black Girl,” finally placing Africa on the radar of world cinema. Sembene would continue to write and make films, producing an unequaled body of critical African art over the next 40 years.

As A.O. Scott wrote June 12 in the New York Times: “he developed a filmmaking style that was populist, didactic and sometimes propagandistic, at once modern in its techniques and accessible, at least in principle, to everyone. He frequently made use of nonprofessional actors and wrote dialogue in various African languages.”

Art and struggle

Though often deeply satirical, Sembene’s films were political to their very marrow. In an interview with the U.K.

Guardian, Sembene argued that it is the responsibility of African filmmakers “to become political, to become involved in the struggle against all the ills of man’s cupidity, envy, individualism, the nouveau-riche mentality, and all the things we have inherited from the colonial



and neocolonial systems.”

“Camp de Thiaroye,”

made in 1988, is perhaps

his masterpiece. The

Sembene on the set of

film, which is based on

Mooladé.

an actual event, depicts

the build-up to a massacre by French colonial

authorities of loyal African forces returning from the war

in Europe. The film is a coolly devastating portrait of

French colonial arrogance, disloyalty and ultimately

savagery.

While many of his films depicted the crimes of French

colonial rule, he was also deeply critical of the corrupt

ruling class in African countries, as well as so-called

traditional beliefs and practices that continue to oppress

women. Sembene’s highly acclaimed final film,

“Mooladé” (2004), is a powerful plea for an end to

female genital mutilation. Other key works include the

withering and hilarious “Xala” (“The Curse,” 1974) about

a westernized and polygamous politician who becomes

afflicted with impotence.

Ousmane Sembene transformed the landscape of

African fiction and cinema, and was its greatest living

practitioner. His achievements, deeply interwoven with

the struggle against colonial and neocolonial rule, are

truly extraordinary and his loss is immeasurable.

Africa, Arts and culture, In memory

NOV 25, 2016

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