
Yesterday, Today, And Tomorrow: Socio-Cultural Evolution
In African Literature and Film

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Source: *Mosaic African Studies E-Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1
(Winter 2010).

Published by: The Howard University Department of
African Studies

Societal evolution in Africa, while explored extensively in a sociological and cultural capacity by Africanist scholars such as Cheik Anta Diop, has rarely been examined in connection with literature and film. Literature and film constitute aspects of culture that reflect social norms and attitudes about a plethora of issues for any people, and Africa is no exception. These issues include tradition, gender/patriarchy, socio-political change, conflict, reconciliation and transformation. Throughout history, the literary and cinematic achievements of Africans across the continent have been largely ignored due to the legacies of enslavement and colonialism and the onslaught of Western hegemony. Despite the compromise of African agency, identity, and dignity that is a direct result of these legacies, African artists have produced literary and cinematic works that belie the inherent will of Africans to survive and thrive amidst untoward circumstances.

Okot p'Bitek, in an essay entitled "Artist, the Ruler", from the book of the same name, believes that "a thought system of a people is created by the most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds that society has produced...the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening [today], what has happened [yesterday] and what will happen [tomorrow]" (p'Bitek, 39). It is in the spirit of this statement that the works of Mariama Ba, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Bessie Head and Ousmane Sembene can be examined as they relate to and portray the evolution of African society. Although many other artists have made just as many, if not more, contributions to the genres of literature and film in Africa, this paper will focus upon the artists aforementioned. In the works of these artists, the issues listed above are dealt with in a way that is uniquely African, and indicative of the high standards to which African artists hold themselves. The treatment of the issues in these works, while strong at times and weak at other times, nevertheless demonstrates

the sense of responsibility and accountability that these artists have with regards to what they seek to impress upon their audiences.

Merriam Webster defines tradition as “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction” (Webster, 1251). Africa is most definitely traditionalist, as is evidenced by its living history. The issue of gender/patriarchy (one is seldom analyzed without the other) is a very sensitive subject among both feminists and artists of African descent. Gender attitudes have changed significantly in Africa as a result of contact with the West, and the egalitarian social practices of the past have been replaced by a bastardized patriarchy that reflects the wholesale embrace of Eurocentric ideals. Likewise, the issues of socio-political change (the redefinition of leadership is one aspect), conflict (ethnic and emotional tension, civil strife, and independence) reconciliation (coming to terms with changing circumstances) and transformation (becoming whole again once confronted with betrayal on several levels) are all at the forefront of African artistic endeavors.

Mariama Ba, the author of So Long a Letter (translated and published in English in 1981, and winner of the very first NOMA Book Award) and Scarlet Song (published posthumously in 1985) was a Senegalese woman whose life's work was dedicated to the erasure of gender inequality in Africa. Her treatment of tradition in her works speaks to her desire to address practices, such as patriarchy, that denied women personal power and agency. Her reliance upon her own traditional experiences informs much of her work, and one can readily recognize the profound respect and love that she had for Africa and Africans.

The contrast in attitude and action between the heroine of So Long a Letter (Ramatoulaye) and the friend to whom she is writing in the novel (Aissatou) is at once thought provoking and inspiring. While the former character embraces what she deems to be her responsibility to her husband (Modou Fall), their children (twelve), and her own wellbeing by remaining in a marriage (the sanctity of which is compromised by Islamic tradition) though betrayed (Ba, 12), the latter character asserts her independence and self-worth by walking away from the same situation (Ba, 32). Ba brilliantly outlines the aspects of tradition that underscore the attitudes and actions of the secondary characters, from the expected sacrifice of self and possessions upon the death of a husband (Ba, 4), to the desire for reclamation of high social status that was perceived to be lost as the result of a marriage beneath one's station (Ba, 26-29). She reveals to her readers both the advantages of adhering to tradition, and the disadvantages of adhering to it. In the end, Ramatoulaye and her children are shown to be well adjusted psychologically, and seem to have healthy relationships with each other, and their friends. The friendship

between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou will be celebrated in a traditional way when they meet. Ramatoulaye's adherence to tradition brought her positively through the challenges in her life and earned her the respect of her family and friends. At the time of his death, Modou Fall was four million francs in debt and living beyond his means in an effort to prove that he could be measured by his 'possessions', as well as respected because of them. His young second wife (Binetou, the same age as his daughter) and the second wife of Aissatou's husband, Mawdo (Nabou), lived miserable, powerless, soulless lives (Ba, 46-50) as a result of adherence to tradition.

Although leadership is dealt with in a limited way due to the format of So Long a Letter, conflict is treated heavily in both it and Scarlet Song. In the former, conflicts between parent and child, husband and wife, in-laws, and even relatives are played out with clarity, while in the latter, Ba attempts to tackle conflict between the races, for the novel is about an interracial marriage between a poor Senegalese man and the white daughter of a French diplomat. In keeping with the idea of the failure of marriage, Ba deals with societal attitudes of betrayal (Page 138) and evil (page 66) surrounding the issue of interracial marriage in Africa and the conflicts that inevitably arise because of it.

The issues of reconciliation and transformation are engaged in a way that is easily recognized in So Long a Letter, but not so much in Scarlet Song. Ramatoulaye demonstrates resilience and self-acceptance in her decision not to marry again, and this transforms her personhood, allowing her to come into her own as woman, and a survivor (So Long a Letter, 68). In Scarlet Song, Ba's treatment of these issues is considerably weaker, for this second novel lacks the strong resolve of the characters in So Long a Letter, which is evidenced by the failure of the marriage in the end. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi highlights the rather limited and weak treatment of these issues in her analysis of Scarlet Song. With regards to the characters of Mirielle (the White wife) and Yaye Khady (the Black mother-in-law) she asserts that both are "reluctant to deal with the distorted definitions that they have of each other [and] are ultimately consumed by their differences" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 113). This work was most likely affected by the terminal illness, unbeknownst to Ba at the time, which consumed the writer shortly before its publication.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, the Zimbabwean playwright (*She No Longer Weeps* [1983]), novelist (Nervous Conditions [1989], The Book of Not [2006]) and filmmaker (*Everyone's Child*), is also well versed in medicine and psychology, which undoubtedly informs her work. In an interview by Jane Wilkinson in 1989, she posits, "the point is that one has to write about things one feels strongly about...these things were larger than any one person's own tragedies...but had a wider implication and origin...and needed to be told" (Wilkinson, 190).

Dangarembga is speaking of tradition, gender/patriarchy, socio-political change, conflict, reconciliation, and transformation, all issues that are addressed quite effectively in her work.

The very personality of the main character and narrator in Nervous Conditions (Tambudzai Sigauke) is an example of the desire by many Zimbabweans to break with tradition while at the same time holding on to it. Tambu, raised in the village and well trained in the traditions of her people, departs from tradition early on by attempting to fulfill her own aspirations of education. The statement, "I shall go to school again" (Nervous Conditions, 16), and the subsequent action that this character took at such a young age despite warnings from her family and the challenges of the double burden presented by tradition (blackness and femaleness) set the stage for Tambu's later ability to assimilate and excel at the mission school and in her uncle's household. It was adherence to tradition that made Tambu more successful in a familial way than her cousin Nyasha, who was plagued in the end with self-doubt and mental illness due to her inability to reconcile herself with tradition.

While tradition dictated that Babamukuru take on the responsibility of the success of the entire family, which he met, it did not afford him the love and support that family is designed to provide. Babamukuru was feared and respected for his accomplishments and his money, but unloved, and this is evidenced by the lack of loyalty that Mai (Tambu's mother) demonstrates in the sequel (The Book of Not, 191). Dangarembga subtly alludes to the conflicts of war and betrayal in The Book of Not, but is more direct about inner conflict as the character of Tambu grows into adulthood. Tambu's promise of and commitment to not forgetting her traditions actually contends with her psychological development. She suffers from what W. E. B. Dubois called "double-consciousness" in his Souls of Black Folk, written in 1903. She is acutely aware of how others see her and what they expect of her, and this knowledge is often in direct conflict with how she sees and feels about herself. In both novels, Tambu is conflicted in this way. She is forced to reconcile herself with her circumstances in each of these works and Dangarembga does an excellent job of presenting the complexities of Zimbabwean society through this, and all of her other characters.

In the film, *Everyone's Child*, Dangarembga utilizes some of the same names as she does in her novels, even though the characters are somewhat different. Nhamo, the little boy who dies in the film, was also the name of Tambu's brother in Nervous Conditions (he also died young). While the film focuses heavily on the institution of the family, and its importance in African society, it also provides some insights into how Zimbabweans have reacted to the AIDS pandemic, and the attitudes of fear and isolation that accompany such circumstances. Her treatment of children and young people in this film

is sensitive and refreshing; her young characters demonstrate the confusion of adolescence (experimentation with drugs) coupled with devastating social conditions (homelessness and unemployment), but at the same time, Dangarembga is able to portray their capacity for love (Tamari and the songwriter/musician) and forgiveness (of Ozias) despite negative circumstances. The family is re-unified due to the embrace of the community. It is unfortunate that death had to be the catalyst for this transformation, but Dangarembga's use of it was effective.

The South African writer, Bessie Head, was prolific in several genres of literature. She wrote novels, short stories, autobiographical essays, and historical treatises, most of which were set in her adopted country of Botswana. Bessie Head's life was challenging, as it included foster care, mission schooling, an unsuccessful marriage, and exile in Botswana. For Bessie Head, as discovered in her autobiographical third novel (A Question of Power, 1974), life in the southern part of Africa was "backbreaking...white people had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that..." (Page 19). For most of her life, Bessie Head was plagued by a personal confusion that stemmed from her experiences, but she was nevertheless inspired by the lives of her people and the ways in which they survived the everyday injustice that characterized Black southern African existence. In writing about the Coloured community in Cape Town, South Africa, in which she found a sense of belonging, she states, "Culture, in its truest sense, in its universalist sense, is the expression of the *personality* of a people" (A Woman Alone, 10).

Margaret Cadmore, the main character in Head's Maru (1971) was, like Head, raised by people other than her parents. Throughout the novel, Margaret is constantly reminded of her unacceptable beginnings (She was born a Masarwa, akin to the 'Bushmen' of the Kalahari desert, who are described in the novel as "low" and "filthy" [Page 12].). Likewise Head, who was born of mixed parentage (White mother, Black father) in a mental institution, was told that her mother was "insane [and had to be locked] up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native" (A Woman Alone, 4) and that she would go crazy, too, if she wasn't careful. This European tradition of castigating the "other" seems to be the only one that is recognizable in Maru, with the exception of that of the elders in the village of Dilepe (where Masarwa were kept as slaves).

Gender/Patriarchy are issues that become blurred in the text due to Head's characterizations. The women in the novel (Margaret Cadmore, the elder, her namesake already mentioned, and Maru's sister Dikeledi) are all self-assured, seemingly strong entities, which is in direct opposition to the prevailing attitudes about gender roles

during this time. While the vulnerabilities of these women are highlighted at certain points in the novel (pages 20-21, 118-120, and 81, respectively), the most interesting aspect of Head's treatment of this issue in the novel is the way in which she characterizes the men. The relationship between Maru and Moleka seems almost homosexual, for the two of them are as emotionally connected as lovers. Head exemplifies this sentiment with the question, "When had he [Moleka] and Maru not lived in each other's arms and shared everything?" (Maru, 33) The other male characters in the novel, the school officials and teachers, the taxi driver, and Maru's henchmen, all demonstrate emotional qualities that are usually attached to female characters. These emotional qualities are exemplified by heart palpitations (Moleka), intuitive assessments (Ranko), and nervous breakdowns (Pete).

With regards to leadership, the lines of demarcation in Maru are evident. Maru is the chosen leader of the people of Dilepe, and he is prepared by the elders in the community to take over this role. His rejection of this role, while not apparent until he announces his intentions to marry, is borne out beautifully in the statement, "Three quarters of the people on this continent are...greedy grasping, back stabbing, a betrayal of mankind. I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull down the old structures and create the new. Not for me any sovereignty over my fellow men." (Maru, 68) This rejection reflects the changing attitudes of the individuals in the society from communal to personal. Maru is written so that the end of the story is at the beginning. This style of writing is interesting in that it allows the reader to reflect upon the unfolding tale in the context of what s/he has already been told about the end.

Conflict between peoples is dealt with rather sparingly in this novel, although Head does highlight racial and cultural prejudice with regards to the Masarwa. Cecil Abrahams is on point when he asserts, "[Head] puts the blame of racist action on the shoulders of all mankind, not the whites only" (Abrahams, 8). Head limits herself to conflict that takes place between members of the same ethnic group, much like Mariama Ba in So Long a Letter. The bulk of the conflict in Maru occurs between Maru and Moleka, in their extremely subtle fight for the love of Margaret, but conflict can also be witnessed between Maru and Dikeledi.

Reconciliation and transformation are apparent in the way that Bessie Head uses magical realism in her work. In the style of Womanist Conjure (a writing style popularized by Afro-American female writers in the 1980's), Head takes her readers on a literary journey that incorporates themes of mysticism and the ethereal nature of human existence and evolution. It is through interdependency, acceptance and love that the lives of the characters in Maru are transformed. Ironically, Margaret's life becomes one of traditional

marriage to Maru, as does Dikeledi's. Moleka's life evolves from one of promiscuity to traditional marriage and monogamy, and Maru's life also is transformed to reflect traditional African social structure. All roles were reversed in the end, belying what Arthur Ravenscroft called the "simultaneous progression, introgression, and circumgression" of Bessie Head's literary process (Aspects...175). Bessie Head was a creative genius.

Finally, the work of legendary filmmaker and novelist Sembene Ousmane needs no real introduction. Interestingly though, one of the hallmarks of Ousmane's thirty-year career is how he revolutionized the way in which films are distributed in Africa by creating film tours that allowed him to travel to the villages in Senegal to show his films where there were no theaters. Although Ousmane has made several films that have revolutionized filmmaking in Africa, the novel and film *Xala* and the film *Faat Kine* are to be examined here in connection with the issues of tradition, gender/patriarchy, socio-political change, conflict, and transformation. Ousmane, like Head, employs the use of magical realism in his work in an effort to reach a wider audience due to widespread illiteracy in Africa. He challenges Africans on the continent and in the diaspora to reject the imagery of the West and embrace the culture that is their own, culture that is defined in film and literature, created not only for the purposes of entertainment, but for education and enlightenment as well. Elizabeth Heath calls him a "pioneer and foundational figure in the history of cinema in Africa" (Africana, 1470). Ousmane's work has additionally "set standards for La Fédération Pan-africaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI)" (Africana, 1471) artistically, linguistically, and technically.

The traditions of Senegalese society, in these works, are religious and patriarchal. Women are expected to defer to men at every level of society, and this is particularly evident in the film *Xala*. The main character of the film, El Hadji, is a polygamist that boasts three wives. He is proud to adhere to this tradition and its accompanying customs, but when he refuses to honor the practice of sitting on the overturned mortar with the ax handle between his feet until his third wife arrived (*Xala*, 18), and is plagued with erectile dysfunction on his wedding night, he resorts to the traditions that are still practiced, but seldom spoken about. *Xala* is the name given to his predicament by tradition, and the only way to truly address it is in the village, with the help of a marabout. In this way, Ousmane demonstrates the dichotomy between tradition and Western acceptance. He shows that African societies wear only the outer garments of Westernization, and in times of crisis, they resort to the African way. Likewise, in *Faat Kine*, the father of the main character is so enslaved by tradition that he would rather murder his daughter for becoming pregnant out-of-wedlock than support her and become a force for change in the society that demonizes his family because of it.

In both films, Ousmane 's use of comedy, gesture, imagery and facial expression is exemplary.

The characterization of the women in these films is strong, defiant, and resistant to societal norms. The first and second wives in *Xala*, the daughter of El Hadji (who refuses to speak French), the third wife's mother (Yay Bineta), Faat Kine herself, her daughter, her mother, all of these women demonstrate agency and a commitment to their own survival. The weakest characterization is of N'Gone (the third wife in *Xala*), who cries incessantly because she does not want to be married. Even the female undesirable is strong enough to hold her own against Rama and Adja Awa Astou (*Xala*, page 102-103). These characterizations mark a definite departure from gender norms in Senegalese society, and Ousmane does a great job of making this phenomenon accessible to the average viewer.

Definitions of leadership are challenged in both of these works in ways that indicate change at both the political and spiritual levels. Faat Kine effectively becomes the leader of her life, household and livelihood through the attainment of her own home and business, acquired without male assistance or formal education. She leads the way for her children (both born out-of-wedlock) to adopt the same attitude in life and sets a fine example for her son (Djib), who aspires to become president. Djib demonstrates how well he has digested his mother's lessons by astutely rejecting his father and uncle's admonitions to "respect their elders". Djib criticizes both of these men for the abandonment and rejection of his mother, and promises to lead the country down a more righteous path than they did. Through the strength of this young character, Ousmane illustrates the faith and hope that he has in Africa's youth. In *Xala*, El Hadji surrenders what could be deemed leadership by way of his acceptance of the traditional penance for his corrupt ways. He allows the leader of the undesirables to dictate his punishment in an effort to redeem his manhood and cure the xala.

Conflict comes to the forefront of Ousmane's films in the form of identity. Although El Hadji identifies with the West, he can find no cure for his xala within its constructs. His embrace of the French language alienates him from his daughter and then his desperate resort to Wolof in the boardroom reveals how conflicted he truly was. His wives and children are clear about who they are. In *Faat Kine*, the issue of conflict is much more pronounced. There are multiple levels of familial conflict, all centered upon identity and tradition. There is conflict between Faat Kine and her children about education, conflict between the children and their fathers about respect and support, conflict between Faat Kine and the wife of her lover, conflicting attitudes between Faat Kine and her friends about sex and marriage. These examples show the complexity of Ousmane's portrayal of conflict in his works.

While El Hadji reconciled himself to the fact that he was betrayed by his beliefs and behavior in *Xala*, Ousmane leaves the viewer to question for him or herself whether or not his life was transformed by the spitting ritual to which the audience was subjected (*Xala*, 101). Ousmane's scathing criticism of the social rejection of the poor and physically challenged bespoke of his commitment to the transformation of real society. Faat Kine remained the master of her own fate, choosing to marry in the end on her own terms, and not those dictated by society. Even though her voice was significantly silenced toward the end of the film, Ousmane successfully and skillfully used imagery to depict her triumph. In her own way, Faat Kine paved the way for the young people, as well as single women like herself to take ownership of their lives and live them in a way that is personally fulfilling and spiritually rehabilitative. The transformative nature of her behavior was evident throughout the entire film.

In conclusion, the literary and cinematic artistry of Mariama Ba, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Bessie Head and Sembene Ousmane have impacted African society in ways that will be forever celebrated as revolutionary and progressive. The commitment of these artists to Africa and its inhabitants is unparalleled, and this commitment is distinctly evident in their works. As Okot p'Bitek so eloquently writes, "It is creative works of the artist that constitute the mental pictures which guide men's [and women's] lives, which make them human." (p'Bitek, 40) These artists have contributed greatly to the recovery of Africa's agency, and the reclamation of its humanity. Their yesterdays have informed our todays, and will undoubtedly contribute to the brightness of our tomorrows.

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