

GLOBALIZATION, A RECYCLING OF COLONIALISM: A READING OF OUSMANE SEMBENE'S *XALA* AND *THE LAST OF THE EMPIRE*.

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Abstract

Through a textual analysis of Sembene Ousmane's novels, *Xala* (1976) and *The Last of the Empire* (1981), the paper suggests that nation building in Africa generally and Senegal in particular has been hampered by globalization. Nation building was trumpeted by African nationalists who united the masses to end colonial rule. The political leaders and the middle class touted nation building. However, after they took up the reins of power from the colonialists, they not only created an elite class of capitalists, but they also sustained exploitative links with the former colonial masters, whose only intent is to under develop African nations. These leaders, who worked in cahoots with the former colonial masters, aped the lifestyle of the former master at the expense of the masses and the nation. Their practices undermined the sense of nationalism. It is against this backdrop that this paper will explore globalization and how it challenges and undermines nation-building in African nation-states.

Key words: Globalization, colonialism, Sembene Ousmane, *Xala*, *The Last of the Empire*

Introduction

African nationalists fought for political independence and freedom of their nation-states. However, after attaining independence, two factors threatened national loyalties: (1) the emergent ethnic divisions that created small tribal nations within the nation-state, and (2) globalization, as people embraced transnational identities. European imperialists in the 1880s geographically demarcated the African continent into colonies for purposes of finding raw materials for their industries, and markets for their manufactured goods. The colonialists also claimed that they had a God-given duty to civilize Africans, who European thinkers had said were irresponsible (Kant as cited in Eze, 1997). Thus, capitalist companies flocked in Africa to exploit resources. Meanwhile, a few Africans acquired a white man's education, and in the 1900s mobilized the natives to resist colonial rule and gain independence.

The liberation movements, led by African nationalists, whipped up the citizens' emotions of patriotism and nationalism; they succeeded in uniting the natives against the colonialists. The native rulers made concerted efforts to take control of their respective nations from the colonial administration. Ousmane's *Xala* opens with the conflict between the Senegalese and colonial administration. The aftermath of years of combat and conflict is noted thus:

The 'businessmen' had met to mark the day with a celebration worth of the event. Never before in the history of Senegal has the Chamber of Commerce and Industry been headed by an African. For the first time a Senegalese occupied the President's seat. It was their victory. (Ousmane, 1976, p. 1)

The African leaders succeeded in taking the bastion of colonial power from the colonialists. However, the political and economic freedom did not result into anticipated changes; the masses were disenchanted because their socio-economic condition did not improve, thanks to neo-colonialism which aggravated the domination and exploitation of Africa politically, economically and socially. Thus, 50 years after independence, Britain is still one of Kenya's biggest trading partners; the close ties between France and Francophone Africa is still evident.

Indeed, *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines neo-colonialism as "the use of economic or political pressure by powerful countries to control or influence other countries" (p. 982). Neo-colonialism, according to Barango (1980), is international relations that lead to "a nationalistic feeling of a sense of subordination, exploitation, and deprivation" (p. 38). Barango noted that neo-colonialism is a "syndrome of political, economic, socio-psychological and cultural domination and manipula-



tion of developing countries by the industrial powers” (p. 20). Foreign powers remotely control, dictate and dominate the economic and political spheres in African states.

Salisu Suleiman (2004) has noted that the concept of neo-colonialism is fast fading out of fashion to give way to globalization. This neo-colonialism that fosters vices such as injustice, corruption and greed is condemned not only in *Xala* (1976), but also in *The Last of the Empire* (1981), both of which novels are written by Sembene Ousmane. David Murphy in *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* said that *The Last of the Empire* “is principally concerned with the means by which the former colonial power manages to maintain its dominant position within the former colonized state” (2001, p.188). There is a strong neo-colonial presence within African governments. This paper attempts to explore globalization and its adverse effects in post-independence Senegal (and by extension, Africa) as epitomized by Sembene Ousmane in *Xala* and *The Last of the Empire*. Globalization has impacted negatively on African economies, politics, and cultures since African nations are on the receiving end as objects of the globalization process. It is the developed countries that control global capital. Thus, globalization becomes a form of domination by developed countries over developing ones.

Globalization as a Threat to African Nations: An analysis of Sembene Ousmane’s *Xala* and *The Last of the Empire*

The novels, *Xala* and *The Last of the Empire*, were published in 1976 (in French and later in English) and in 1981 respectively by Sembene Ousmane, a prominent Senegalese novelist and filmmaker. Ousmane preoccupies himself with issues that plague Senegal, arising from globalization. Both texts are satires that are concerned with the ‘impotence’ of the postcolonial leaders, and how the former colonial power maintains its domination over its colony. There is an uneasy link between the former colonial power and the native rulers. Ousmane conceives globalization, especially during the post-colonial era, as a threat to the nation. According to Smith, while nationalism puts the nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote national autonomy, national unity and national identity, globalization threatens the nation’s integrity (1998). With globalization, political

boarders become irrelevant; after all, globalization transcends physical barriers. Burbules and Torres (2000) contended that globalization reduces “barriers to the free flow of goods, workers and investments across national borders” (p. 14).

Samir Amin (2008), in his article titled “‘Market Economy’ or Oligopoly-Finance Capitalism” rightly critiqued globalization as an imperialist agenda that does not help developing countries. He viewed globalization as “nothing other than the strategy of conquest” employed to institute financial domination “on a global scale” (p.55). Indeed, the transnational actors that are used to propagate domination over developing countries through trade and foreign direct investment include multi-national corporations such as Coca Cola, Pepsi, KFC; international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank; and transnational bodies such as the United Nations. These global organizations (United Nations, World Bank) exercise economic and/or political power directly or indirectly on African nations.

In *Xala* (1976), El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye is the key character. He is a member of the new postcolonial middle class and does not want to be identified with the African cultures. He is anxious to belong to the Western culture. Indeed, he can be said to be culturally sterile. At his lavish marriage party, the dressing and the music are Western; “[r]ock’-n’-roll alternated with the Pachanga” (Ousmane, 1976, p. 22). Moreover, El Hadji Beye prefers speaking French to Wolof – one of the indigenous languages in Senegal. He speaks only French to his daughter, Rama, who answers in Wolof. His children go to foreign schools and are encouraged to speak French. French alienates him from his society, whose majority speaks Wolof. The French colonialists were bent on turning Africans into French speakers, thereby killing the native language and culture. French, thus, becomes the language of a global economy. Indeed, Sembene uses Rama – the embodiment of cultural activism -- to suggest that African languages --such as Wolof -- should be adopted as the official language of the nation (1976, pp. 93-94). Sembene attacks universalism and wants African unique elements not to be clouded by globalization or universalism (pp. 3-4). The global culture leads to the erosion of African indigenous languages and, by extension, cultures; after all, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts, language is a carrier of culture (1986). El Hadji Beye’s linguistic and cultural

alienation confirm Ngugi wa Thiong'o's observation that when one embraces the languages (and cultures) of the colonizer, one learns to despise one's own native traditions (1986).

In addition, globalization is negative since it turns Africans into consumers of Western goods, not producers; the "impotence" (*xala*) that Ousmane talks about in his work is metaphorical as the African elite have failed to bring about the desired political, social and economic changes. In *Xala* the profligate businessmen wear expensive clothes made in Europe. El Hadji Beye wears "a 'Prince of Wales' suit" (Ousmane, 1976, p. 70), and a gold wrist-watch (p. 2). The wedding gifts include "shoes in various fashions and colors, wigs from blonde to jetblack" (p. 4). Oumi N'Doye, El Hadji's second wife, is said to be "a great expert on overseas women's fashions, those of the *grands couturiers* and the film stars" (p. 33). Moreover, in the film *Xala*, El Hadji and his business associates, who have blindly adopted the colonialists' ways, appear in tuxedos. Africans give up their authentic dress style and imitate the dressing of the colonial masters. Clearly, the elite are culturally alienated and are distinct from the masses. They look down upon their cultural values and, as a result of globalization, they suffer self-hate.

Indeed, a globalized modern man has no cultural identity. In the process of homogeneity (i.e. the increasing similarity between and among different societies), globalization annihilates African unique cultural identities; differences are lost. It is unfortunate that what is globalized is that of the West. In *The Last of the Empire*, Cheikh Tidiane Sall had received an assimilationist education and therefore considered himself to be French before being African. Sall tells his son, Badou, that his home is filled with European goods and books, nothing is African. Evidently, globalization has destroyed cultural identities; Africans have become victims of a westernized, consumer culture. Knowledge and tastes are controlled by Western forces that 'otherize' and dominate over Africa.

Globalization is an infamous phenomenon as it does not benefit the masses in African countries. It is a minority few (politicians and businessmen) who benefit from the opportunities created by globalization. Broad and Cavanagh (2006) summed up the inevitable inequalities that result from globalization thus: "Economic globalization has contributed to the widening gap between its wealthy beneficiaries and the marginalized within most nations, and to a growing divide between most poor nations ... and the club of rich nations." (p.

24). The hardest hit by the inequality are the poor masses in a nation. The petty bourgeoisie represent greedy, morally depraved and corrupt forces that are bent on exploiting and marginalizing the masses. The middle class perpetrates the economic inequality that characterized colonial rule such that the masses do not experience the material benefits of independence. After African leaders replace the colonial bourgeoisie, they fail to perform a productive function. They do not tackle the social, economic, political and cultural problems of the country. Guided by personal gain, they look for quick profits whatever the means. In *Xala*, they are depicted as parasitic -- they deprive the starving drought victims of foodstuffs. Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* argued that the African middle class is a mere economic and political stooge. He noted that it has nothing to contribute to progressive revolutionary change (1965). Instead of making productive investments, they spend their ill-gotten wealth lavishly in absurd imitations of the foreign consumer culture; for example, El Hadji Beye and his kind live in villas, drink only mineral water, own French furniture, and drive expensive cars. Indeed, El Hadji Beye is so obsessed with mineral water that he not only drinks it but he also uses it to wash the car and cool the car radiator. His second wife, Oumi N'Doye, does not buy meat from local butcheries; she imports from Paris (Ousmane, 1976).

Similarly, in *The Last of the Empire*, one politician known as Daouda reveals that he has recently purchased a pavilion in France using a government loan (Ousmane, 1981). Clearly, this middle class fails to be fruitful in their nation. Their obscene affluence is contrasted with the miserable lives of the destitute that include beggars, cripples, adolescents, maids, and lepers. The beggar attributes his poor lot to El Hadji Beye, who not only ignored protests and sold "a large piece of land at Jeko belonging to our clan", but also had the beggar thrown into prison (Ousmane, 1976, pp. 99 – 100).

As noted above, since globalization benefits a few, inequalities abound among citizens. The inequalities in *Xala* yield into conflict between the less privileged, represented by the beggars, and El Hadji who stands for the oppressors. These inequalities explain the prevalence of political instabilities in Africa. Rapley asserted that globalization explains the violent regime changes in developing countries. He argued that the rich dominant class (bourgeoisie) benefits from globalization at the expense of the



suffering subordinate class whose needs are not met (2004). Material inequality leads to violent reactions and ultimate fall of governments. This is evident in *The Last of the Empire* where there is a military coup d'état to oust the Venerable one – President Mignane (Ousmane, 1981). Similarly, in *Xala*, a violent procession of the oppressed, marginalized, destitute masses matches to El Hadji Beye's home and engages in destructive activity (Ousmane, 1976, p. 97).

Globalization is similar to colonialism in the way it manipulates and exploits Africa. In both novels, the French control African politics through their political and military advisors to the government. In *The Last of the Empire*, Sembene condemns international intervention in the affairs of independent African nations. He discusses the weight of foreign debt as well as the questionable personal and national interests of foreign advisors. For example, French ambassador Jean de Savognard, and Adolphe, the French advisor to President Mignane, advise the president on economic, military, and diplomatic aid. Savognard ensures the security of French economic interests by maintaining a Senegalese leadership favorable to French policies (1981). Thus, the foreign governments wield power over former colonies to execute their decisions.

Similarly, in *Xala*, African businessmen are limited to a few “branches of the economy” including “wholesale trade, public works contracts, the pharmacies, the private clinics, the bakeries, the manufacturing industry, the bookshops and cinemas” (Ousmane, 1976, p.1). Notably, they are excluded from the banks. They are businessmen without funds (p. 84). Indeed, a bitter El Hadji admits their incompetence as businessmen when he says that they are “mere agents, less than petty traders! [who] merely redistribute. Redistribute the remains the big men deign to leave us. Are we businessmen? I say no! Just clodhoppers!” (p. 83). These businessmen have nothing to do with the actual process of production. They are middlemen for the Western capitalists. El Hadji Beye's indictment of himself and his former business partners echoes Fanon's view that the middle class are “intermediaries” (Fanon, 1965, p. 159). El Hadji continues to say that “the colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. He promises us the leftovers of the feast if we behave ourselves” (Ousmane, 1976, p. 84). These foreign companies manipulate, control and exploit Africans. When El Hadji was setting out to expand his business,

he lacked funds, but ‘because he was well-known and had a certain standing in the business community, overseas investors paid him to act as a front’ (p. 3). The middlemen serve the interests of neo-colonialism and imperialism. Thus, globalization patronizes the African to guarantee continued exploitation and manipulation.

Politically, the leaders in government, who are advised by the French, pledge allegiance to the former colonial powers, which perpetuate the politics of the colonial era. Africa is not liberated from the former empire as African leaders continue to depend upon colonial masters. In *The Last of the Empire* a disillusioned Doyen (Sall) says, “colonialism no longer consists in occupying land, but in demeaning the minds, crushing the culture and distorting the growth of society, and imposing an armada of obtuse advisers whose role within our new administration is not to help us, but to curb every daring reform, every enterprising spirit” (Ousmane, 1981, p. 39). Ngugi (1986) rightly blames the continued imperialist tradition in Africa on “the flag-waving native ruling classes” that promote the neocolonial interests of the West (p. 102).

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, I would like to argue that globalization and neo-colonialism are closely related. Homi K. Bhabha (2005), who significantly contributed to the development of post-colonial theory, contended that “the colonial shadow falls across the successes of globalization” (p. xiii), and that the ideologies of new global empires are very much in line with those of former colonizers. Sembene Ousmane in the two texts attempts to condemn globalization, for it perpetuates poor governance, corruption, injustice, exploitation and oppression of African countries, and it erodes cultures of the developing countries. Globalization also makes us consumers and not producers. We can safely assert that nationalism is threatened by globalization.

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