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# BOKUTANI

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STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

SEPTEMBER, 2025



**ECOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE  
IN GLOBAL AFRICA**



## Editorial

This inaugural issue of *Bokutani* delves into the intricate and dynamic relationships between knowledge systems across the African continent and its diasporas. By focusing on the theme "Ecologies of Knowledge in Global Africa," we aim to explore how African knowledge traditions intersect, adapt, and respond to global contexts. This editorial sets the stage for a nuanced understanding of these interactions, emphasizing the significance of African agency in shaping knowledge landscapes.

**Bokutani: Journal of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA)**

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Studies Association of Africa

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We publish original research articles, theoretical essays, reflections, and reviews that critically engage with African intellectual traditions, decolonial approaches, and global conversations from Africa-centered perspectives.

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1. *"Knowledge Production as Discourses of Power: The Politics of Archives and the Production of Knowledge"* by **Conrad John Masabo**.
2. *"African Archives, Digital Humanities, and Decolonial Narratives: A Case Study of Archiving"* by **Olalekan Ojumu**.
3. *"The Language Policy in Senegal: Digital Opportunities, Decolonial Narratives, and African Futures"* by **Arfang Dabo and Vieux Alassane Touré**.
4. *"African Languages and the Ecologies of Knowledge in the United States' Midwestern Universities"* by **Paul Onesmus Ntinda**.
5. *"Sent by the Gods: François Duvalier's Appropriation and Performance of Divine Authority"* by **Phillip Effiong**.
6. *"From the Invisible to the Visible: Poetics of Colonial Disaster in Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade by Assia Djebar"* by **Marius Kahakeu Deffo**.
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# The Power of Water

## *A Message to the Future from Ousmane Sembène*

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### Abstract

In the film *Xala* (1975), Senegalese auteur Ousmane Sembène launches a biting critique of a post-colonial African elite trapped in Eurocentric economic flows despite the arrival of political independence. The plastic Evian bottle that appears and reappears throughout the film symbolizes the African elite class's slavish commitment to European mores and values. In *Xala*, independence has not reached the consumption habits of the African men who lead the nation, nor their families. Fifty years after *Xala*'s debut, Sembène's critique of an African freedom that does not attend to consumption and class is only more piercing. Now, *Xala*'s fetishized Evian bottle appears less like a satirized habit and more like a harbinger of the coming ecological disaster. This article reads *Xala*'s ubiquitous Evian bottle through twenty-first century eyes. I use contemporary discussions about plastic, waste colonialism, and water privatization in West Africa to illuminate the enduring knowledge of filmmaker Ousmane Sembène and his film, *Xala*.

*Keywords: Postcolonial Critique, Consumer Colonialism, Ousmane Sembène, Plastic Waste, Xala*

## Message to the Future

For almost a decade I screened Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975) in a course about modern African politics. In my syllabus, we watch *Xala* after discussing the stirring political visions of anticolonial thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah, Amílcar Cabral, and Frantz Fanon. Then comes *Xala*, a film that propels students into the frustrations of national independence. What went wrong when European colonialism ended? What factors shape African countries' trajectory from colony to nation-state to neo colony? *Xala* provides one set of answers through the story of fictional businessman El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, a leader in the new economic and political dispensation of post-independence Senegal. El Hadji is part of an elite class of businessmen-politicians who make speeches about the importance of "Africanité!" and still accept briefcases stuffed with money from a French man lurking at their shoulder. He lives in a Dakar city of contrasts. We witness his life of high consumption and in the next frame, view a group of impoverished and disabled citizens moving through the streets in search of sustenance. When El Hadji marries a third wife, his wedding night is marred by *xala*, a curse of sexual impotence. Suddenly, his wealth and status are of no use. As he searches for a cure, the vices of the African bourgeois class and the failures of political independence are on display.

One semester, while discussing *Xala*'s visual language, a student asked me about Ousmane Sembène the environmentalist. She perceived a plastic Evian bottle that appears multiple times in the film as an indictment of plastic waste pollution. For this student— a sustainability studies major staring down climate catastrophe—the scourge of single-use plastic flowing from Europe and North America and congealing as waste in African waters and lands was a topic that she knew something about.<sup>1</sup> To her eyes, *Xala* was a prescient warning. She wanted to know: when Ousmane Sembène placed the Evian bottle in a film about the disillusionments of national independence, was he divining the future? Almost five decades after *Xala*'s debut, Senegal would pass a law banning the import, sale, and stocking of single use plastics.<sup>2</sup> Did Sembène peer into the future and see the coming flood? Could he perceive the future presence of Modou Fall, an environmental activist who walks the city of Dakar as "L'homme Plastique"? Elaborately outfitted from head to toe in the detritus of global plastic waste, Modou Fall roams Dakar's beaches warning all who will listen about the harm of plastic waste. Meanwhile, children call out that L'homme Plastique is *Kankurang*, a Senegambian spirit of order, justice and protection.<sup>3</sup>

In this inaugural issue of *Bokutani: The Journal of the African Studies Association of Africa*, our task is to interrogate and uplift African ecologies of knowledge. I immediately think of *Xala*, the Evian bottle, and my student's sense that the illustrious Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène was calling out to her, across decades and distances, about the plastic pollution crisis. The meaning of *Xala* (1975) continues to unspool, the shadow of Sembène's analysis lengthening as new generations rise. These messages to the future from our African knowledge-creators are a gift; they also require something of us. The Evian bottle is just one of many ways that Ousmane Sembène's film grows more relevant with the passage of time. The year 2025 is *Xala*'s half-century anniversary and Sembène's spotlight on the follies and tribulations of the postindependence Senegalese elite dazzles. The film's muted colors have deepened into a shout. The class of political elites that Sembène roasts in the film is now neither novel nor marginal. Their consumption habits have been redefined by subsequent generations as the substance of a "good life". Still, *Xala*'s message is there: our commodity fetish, our hunger for the economic and cultural markets dominated by Euro-American capital is part of what ails us. It is the sickness afflicting our bodies, our national politics, and our natural environment. If this needed to be said in 1975, in 2025 it must be trumpeted from the rooftops.

1 Alain Hutson, "In the Ocean: Senegal's Plastic Waste Problem" *Africa Today* 68:1, 2021.

2 <https://www.au-senegal.com/IMG/pdf/loi-plastique-senegal-2020-04.pdf>.

3 Leo Corrál, "'Plastic Man' in Senegal on mission against trash— in pictures," *The Guardian*, 11/21/2022. Camara, Mady, and Ruth Maclean. "This 'plastic Man' Has a Cape and a Superhero's Mission: Cleaning up Senegal." *The New York Times*, 20 Jan. 2022.



## Meeting Sembène

Predicting the future was not out of the ordinary for Ousmane Sembène (1923 - 2007). Over eight decades of life, the Senegalese writer and filmmaker created with intention and speed, pouring his insights and questions into ten books of fiction (novels and short stories) and eighteen films— four shorts, ten features and four documentaries.<sup>4</sup> At his death, the liberal United States newspaper, *The New York Times*, dubbed him “by consensus, the father of African cinema.”<sup>5</sup> If Sembène is to be dubbed a patriarchal progenitor, it must also be said that his own political vision directly contradicts this Eurocentric obsession with individual firsts, bests, and mosts. Sembène created a production company, *Filmi Domirew*, a filmmaking labor union, a film festival (FESPACO - the Panafrican Festival of Cinema at Ouagadougou), and *Kaddu*, a Wolof newspaper. His artistic work grew out of his political convictions, and these, in turn, grew out of his life experience as a subject of the French colonial empire. After fighting for France in the 1940’s, Sembène became a dockworker in Marseilles and joined the French Communist Party in the 1950s. He protested Europe’s imperial aggression in Algeria, Korea, and Indochina and studied filmmaking in Moscow. Eventually, he returned to Senegal, determined to play his role in building a new Africa.<sup>6</sup>

For Sembène, art, literature and film were strategies for social renewal and political education. “Mine is a class struggle, it is a fact of life for me, there is no point in denying it. Even when I’m dead, I want everybody to get this fact straight.”<sup>7</sup> Gratitude for Sembène, who preemptively resisted the critics, textbooks, and biographers who would seek to separate his work from its political purpose, pinning the African artist behind glass!

4 Samba Gadjigo, “A Tribute to Ousmane Sembène” *Framework: the Journal of Cinema and Media*, 2008: 31.

5 A. B. Assensoh & Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, “A Farewell Salute to Ousmane Sembène...” in Cole and Diop, *Ousmane Sembène: Writer, Filmmaker, Revolutionary Artist*, Africa World Press, 2016: 429.

6 Samba Gadjigo and Sada Niang, “Dossier 2: Ousmane Sembène” *Black Camera*:12: 2, 2021: 452.

7 Gadjigo and Niang, 2021: 465.



Sembène self-fashioning is among his most beautiful creations. Scholars Ernest Cole and Oumar Cherif Diop define him as “a committed revolutionary artist and trade union organizer.”<sup>8</sup> For U.S. actor and activist Danny Glover, Sembène is “a visionary who understood the power of imagination as a form of resistance against the colonizer...”<sup>9</sup> Sembène’s biographer, professor Samba Gadjigo, describes his muse within a broader African tradition of socially-relevant creators. “The artist is the one who prepares a revolution, the one who incites it. I would go further. Even in the middle of a revolution, the true artist is the one who prepares the next revolution...”<sup>10</sup> Novelist Akin Adesokan marvels at Sembène’s “radicalism of spirit”: “the older he got the more radical he became.”<sup>11</sup> For over fifty years, scholars and artists who dare to take the measure of Sembène’s cloth cannot help but call it revolutionary.

Fiercely outspoken, Sembène’s *chosen churlishness* exposes the traps baiting African artists then and now. *Here* he is, responding to an interview question about how his films are received in Europe: “L’Europe n’est pas mon centre.... Pourquoi voulez-vous que je sois comme le tournesol qui tourne autour du soleil? Ju suis moi-meme le soleil!”<sup>12</sup> There he is at the 1979 FESPACO in Ouagadougou warning his fellow creators that they are “increasingly treading on a dangerous path.” They are at risk, he says, of succumbing to commercialism and creating “stale sentimental slush... shallow and devoid of any substance, albeit impeccably shot.”<sup>13</sup> In the same speech he issues another warning. “[I]n the next decade or so, we are going to see Africans putting out European content for other Africans, that is, they are going to peddle Western cultural products to you and me, whilst making you believe it is still African.”<sup>14</sup> The future Sembène warned against is the present we now live. With platforms like Netflix marketing Africa, global access to South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, or Zimbabwean film is controlled by the profit motive of multinational companies. Streaming services have made films featuring African actors, settings, and languages easier to access than ever before. African movies are no longer something “that one must ‘find’; now they are something that one ‘receives.’”<sup>15</sup> Still, Sembène’s warning rings in our ears. If the production, marketing, distribution and preservation of so-called African cinema now lies with Netflix, a multinational behemoth able to dominate locally controlled and indigenous platforms, there is a risk that the world of African film becomes whatever Netflix decides it should be.<sup>16</sup> “The thieves and crooks of today are going to be the film producers of tomorrow,” Sembène warns. “With all their accumulated ill-gotten wealth, they are going to fund films, on condition that they exert absolute control over the whole process.”<sup>17</sup> The artist Ousmane Sembène did not hesitate to speak as an oracle.

For Ousmane Sembène, no social institution— neither mosque, nor the traditional shrine, neither the French colonial state nor postcolonial Senegalese nation, neither “traditional” heritage nor religious reformers— was beyond scrutiny, question, or reproach. This dockworker-turner writer-turned filmmaker saw the problem of oppression as complex and many-sided. His goal was clear: to “participate in the liberation of Africa and in the building of an African nation, through art.”<sup>18</sup> Having articulated this purpose, an unflinching Sembène exposed

8 Cole and Diop, “Introduction” in *Ousmane Sembène: Writer, Filmmaker, Revolutionary Artist*, Africa World Press, 2016:1.

9 Danny Glover, “Foreward” in *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*, Indiana University Press, 2010: xi

10 Gadjigo, 2008: 31.

11 Akin Adesokan, “The Significance of Ousmane Sembène,” *World Literature Today* 2008: 37.

12 Férid Boughedir, *Caméra d’Afrique* (African Cinema: Filming Against All Odds) 1983. “Europe is not my center... Why should I be like the sunflower that revolves around the sun? I myself am the sun!” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foQ0q4w6z4Q>

13 Ousmane Sembène, “Statement at Ougadougou” (1979) in *Black Camera* 2021: 471.

14 Ousmane Sembène, “Statement at Ougadougou” (1979) in *Black Camera* 2021: 473.

15 Alexander Fisher, “Netflix and Africa: Streaming, branding and tastemaking in non-domestic African film markets” in *World Cinema on demand: global film cultures in the era of online distribution*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: 191.

16 The example of the African Film Library, an initiative by South African distributor and channel M-Net, is instructive. According to Fisher (2022) “The AFL promised to offer over 600 African films for streaming on demand. African Film Library’s inventory was drawn predominantly from the canon of African auteur-based films, represented by the likes of Ousmane Sembène, Idrissa Oudraogo and Djibril Diop Mambety. Had it been successful, the website would have offered a comprehensive cross-section of African film history, but unfortunately the project was abandoned before the site was even functional.”

17 Sembène, “Statement at Ougadougou” in *Black Camera*, 2021: 474.

18 Samba Gadjigo and Sada Niang, “Sembène’s Legacy to FESPACO” *Black Camera* 12:2, 2021: 451.

the different types of violence that kept Africa and Africans in chains. French colonialism was bloodthirsty and hypocritical. *La Noire de... Black Girl* (1966) is a treatise on the plight of a domestic migrant worker who achieves her dream of moving to France and finds it is a nightmare. *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) is also about colonial betrayal, this time regarding the West African troops who fought for France in World War II and returned to colonial repression. However, in Sembène's oeuvre, European colonization is not the sole oppressor. *Guelwaar* (1993) names the crime of African "state begging," euphemistically called global aid or international development.<sup>19</sup> The culminating scene in another film, the controversial *Ceddo* (1977) shows the regally dressed Wolof princess shooting and killing the imam who has introduced Islam, and disorder, to her community. The masterpieces *Faat Kiné* (2001) and *Moolade* (2004) reveal patriarchy's distortion within Senegalese society. In Sembène's "evening school" of cinema, the curriculum must be rigorous! "We have to be daring and reconquer our cultural and cinematographic space. To defend our countries, our villages, our homes, from the invader is an act of heroism. It is even more noble to be strongminded enough to fight imposture and iniquity at home."<sup>20</sup> As an artist who dared to pursue his purpose with nuance and complexity, Ousmane Sembène and his films speak boldly into our present contradictions.

Fighting the many faces of African exploitation and oppression requires deliberateness in both practice and message. Initially a novelist writing in French, Sembène Ousmane learned filmmaking to reach more people in a country (Senegal) and a continent (Africa) where literacy in European languages may function as an obstacle to collective understanding and cooperation. Sembène was not interested in "making cinema for my buddies or for a limited circle of specialists. What I'm interested in is exposing problems of the people to which I belong..."<sup>21</sup> In pursuit of the mass audience, Sembène's films are richly visual. He utilizes African languages and multilingual subtitles to expand understanding, first to the community where he films, and then beyond.<sup>22</sup> Along with utilizing Wolof, Pulaar/Fulani, or Dioula language, Sembène's films are marked by a deliberate and clearly articulated dialogue. The slow speech of his actors, often chalked up to a habit of casting everyday people rather than trained actors in his films, also ensures maximum intelligibility for the multilingual Senegalese audience.<sup>23</sup> These tactics worked. In their time, Sembène's films were locally popular.<sup>24</sup> According to the filmmaker, when *Xala* was first released, "nobody drove a Mercedes Benz in Dakar city for three months."<sup>25</sup>

## Xala

Now that you have met Ousmane Sembène, please watch the film *Xala*. In the age of [youtube](#), this fifty-year old Senegalese movie is fairly easy to find, for free, with English or French subtitles.<sup>26</sup> It will take you about two hours to screen. If possible, watch it with at least one other human being. When Sembène made his films, he would screen them in community; he would bring his equipment to small towns and villages and run the tape.<sup>27</sup>

19 Sada Niang, Samba Gadjigo, Ousmane Sembène, "Interview with Ousmane Sembène" *Research in African Literatures* 26: 3 (1995) 174.

20 Ousmane Sembène, "Cinema as Evening School," (1995) in *Black Camera* 12:2, 2021: 461

21 Ousmane Sembène, "Filmmakers Have a Great Responsibility to Our People" *Cineaste* 6:1 (1973): 27.

22 Michael T. Martin, "On Mediated Solidarity" *Black Camera* 12:2, 2021: 506.

23 Kwate Nee Owoo, "The Language of Real Life: Interview with Ousmane Sembène" *Framework* 36, 1989

24 Ousmane Sembène: An Interview' by G. M. Perry and Patrick McGilligan with Ousmane Sembène in *Film Quarterly* (Vol. 26, No. 3, Spring, 1973) pp. 36-42.

25 Josef Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop, "Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*: The Novel, the Film, and their Audiences," *Research in African Literatures* 29:2, 1998: 157.

26 Please note that the English subtitled version of *Xala* limits the viewer because its subtitles fail to convey whether the characters use Wolof or French when speaking. In addition, the meaningful Wolof songs of the soundtrack are not translated in the subtitles. Please read Gugler and Diop, 1998 for song translations.

27 Jared Rapfogel, Richard Porton and Ousmane Sembène, "The Power of Female Solidarity: An Interview with Ousmane Sembène," *Cineaste* 30:1, 22.

In *Xala's* satire, the Evian bottle is one symbol among many of the distorted values of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the character standing in for Senegal's political leaders. El Hadji insists that the impoverished and disabled young men begging on the streets are "human rubbish" who are spoiling our independence and should be deported far away. At the same time, he cherishes Europe-made plastic bottles of water, and their radical expansion of the waste burden.

The Evian bottle appears in three scenes in *Xala's* second hour. First, at minute 82, El Hadji's driver, Modou, takes a 1.5 liter bottle of Evian out of the boot of the Mercedes Benz, opens it, and pours the contents into a plastic bucket. One of the impoverished citizens, recently attacked by state police agents, appears with bandaged forehead to clean El Hadji's car. He picks up a plastic bucket filled with the luxury European mineral water and goes to work! The driver, Modou, opens another bottle of Evian and pours this one directly into the car's engine. In *Xala*, El Hadji's relationship to Evian water is an absurdity. Do imported luxury cars like the German Mercedes Benz require imported water to function? In a scene shot and shown in real time, we see Modou opening the bottle, we hear the sound of Evian water splashing into a blue plastic bucket, and also the sound of the empty plastic bottle when it hits the Dakar street.<sup>28</sup> This is the image Sembène offers: a Senegalese driver pouring French bottled water into a German Mercedes-Benz next to Senegalese citizens begging and singing in Wolof on a Dakar street. This is the distorted cosmopolitanism of the neocolonial era.

The second time we see Evian Water, the bottle sits prominently on the table between El Hadji and his university-educated daughter Rama. When Rama drives from the university to her father's store on a motorbike, her father greets and speaks to her in French. She answers in Wolof. When her father opens and pours a cup of Evian, Rama explains that she "doesn't drink imported water." El Hadji, drinks 2 liters a day; it is his "preferred drink," he theatrically proclaims. The generational and ideological conflict is distilled to the question of Evian. For Rama, Evian's foreign origin and economic context are a problem; this is "imported water." For her father, Evian is valuable precisely because it is foreign. "Even his drinking water comes from Europe!" El Hadji intones meaningfully about a colleague. (1:26:56) During this conversation, the camera pans from father to daughter. When El Hadji is in the frame, he is shown in close-up and the Evian bottle sits prominently by his face. When the camera shifts to Rama, she is also in close-up, but she is positioned in front of a map of Africa. The continent, rendered without any country or colony territories, is artistically drawn in purple, blue, and yellow, perfectly echoing and matching Rama's boubou. If El Hadji is a brand ambassador for the French luxury water Evian, his daughter Rama is repping Africa, envisaged as undivided, whole, and aligned to the aspirations of progressive youth who will parse commodity, custom, and culture.

The third time that we see the Evian bottle is in *Xala's* final scene. The disinherited of Dakar, the so-called "human rubbish" that El Hadji has spent the film orbiting, ignoring, and being frustrated by, have marched to his house and invaded it. They have forced their way into his kitchen, they are sitting in his chairs, they are about to reveal that they are his relatives, his cursers, and his potential healers. During this raid, we see the Evian bottle, presumably one of the two liters that El Hadji boasts he consumes daily, sitting in the fridge. By the end of the scene, El Hadji realizes that all that he possesses – the contents of the fridge, the foreign foods, the three-piece suit, the briefcase and its contents, Evian Water— ultimately cannot break the *xala*. To be made well, the liquid to which he must submit, finally, is the phlegm of his disinherited relatives. In *Xala's* last freeze frame, sputum, expelled by the so-called human rubbish and spewed on El Hadji's naked body with maximum visual and sound impact, is finally his cure.

28 Teshome Gabriel, "Xala: A Cinema of Wax and Gold" *Presence Africaine* 116, 1980: 213.

## Plastic Bottles of Water

In my course lectures about *Xala*, I describe the plastic Evian bottle as a symbol of the African bourgeoisie's disordered attachment to anything and everything that is from abroad, and specifically European. The theatrical performance of *l'indépendance*, communicated by a frantically jubilant drum and dance scene at the film's beginning, does not shift economic relations or consumer desire. Wealthy Africans in Sembène's film continue to crave European products even as their own land and resources have been devalued, exploited, and sold at a pittance. Sembène's critique of the colonial hangover has been articulated by scholars of African literature, film, and politics.<sup>29</sup> However, my 21st century student asked me to consider the Evian bottle not only as an analogy, a symbol of neocolonialism, but as a material itself.

As one of the most recognized global bottled water brands, Evian is featured in twentieth century films and novels as the quintessential luxury product. A story-myth about European history, wealth, and healing is central to the brand identity.<sup>30</sup> Supposedly, in 1789, the Marquis de Lessert, a Frenchman suffering from kidney stones, discovered the healing effects of the Cachat Spring while walking in the Alps. Subsequently, French nobility and Europe's upper classes traveled to the region to take the waters as a curative aid.<sup>31</sup> Evian continues to deploy this narrative of European health and wealth to sell its product.<sup>32</sup> Even today, the taste and smell of the city of Paris's water is measured and checked against Evian.<sup>33</sup> In *Xala*'s cinemascap, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye's praise of Evian water is ironic. Are the waters of Evian-les-bains able to restore a man suffering from the Wolof *xala*? Meanwhile, what is the state of Senegal's waters?

The plastic Evian bottle that El Hadji clutches and venerates (and which Rama refuses) is the creation of Danone, formerly known as BSN group, one of the four transnational food and beverage corporations that dominate global markets. The innovation of plastic polyethylene terephthalate (PET) water bottles dates from the 1980s, but Sembène's *Xala* was released first in 1975.<sup>34</sup> The film is a glimpse into the prehistory of bottled water. Before *Xala* was a film, it was a novella published in 1973. Evian bottled water does not appear in this novella; elite foreign consumption is displayed differently. Why does Ousmane Sembène feature Evian bottled water when he shifts the story from book to film? Likely, these 1.5 liter plastic bottles of Evian Water were observed in real time, when the movie was being filmed in Dakar. *Xala* is a visual record of Evian's early entry into the plastic water market. Not only was Evian packaged in plastic in 1975, some Dakarais were drinking it!

Before the arrival of the PET plastic that would take over the global bottled water market in the 1980s, becoming both trend and trouble, there was a limited period where PVC plastic was used as packaging for French mineral water. Plastic mineral water bottles, made with PVC, entered the French market for the first time in late 1968 and as a risk. It was experimental to shift from glass to a brand-new material, PVC plastic, to sell mineral water. At the time, plastic was not yet widely used to store food and beverage for human consumption. Moreover, French mineral water, considered a "therapeutic substance," was regulated by the French Ministry of Health. Plastic packaging required cultural, marketing, and even legal shifts. Prodded by companies eager to capitalize on this "one-way" packaging model, the French government investigated whether PVC packaging would alter or degrade the qualities of the mineral water inside.<sup>35</sup> In 1968, the Maxi Vittel, a 1.5 L PVC-plastic bottled mineral water, finally hit the French market. Would French consumers accept this new format of PVC plastic

29 Aaron Mushengyezi, "Reimagining Gender and African Tradition?: Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* Revisited" *Africa Today* 51: 1, 2004.

30 Susannah O'hUadhaigh, '*Evian Backwards*': the fetishization of bottled water. Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dublin, Ireland, 2018.

31 Leo Paul Dana, "Evian Water" *British Food Journal*, Vol. 102, No. 5-6, (2000) 379.

32 O'hUadhaigh, 2018: 23.

33 Andrea Muehleback, *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe*, (Duke University Press) 2023: 167.

34 Guy Hawkins, "The Impacts of Bottled Water" *WIREs Water* 4:3 (2017)

35 Nicolas Marty, "The True Revolution of 1968: Mineral Water Trade and the Early Proliferation of Plastic 1960s-1970s" *Business History Review*, 94:3: 495. Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, (Duke University Press) 2021: 2.



for their mineral water? The answer was yes. By the end of the 1970s, this new plastic represented more than 70 percent of all packaging for France's mineral water companies, including Evian. With this history, I suspect that the 1.5 liter plastic Evian bottle featured in *Xala* was made from polyvinyl chloride or PVC.

Although the plastic Evian bottle was deemed safe by the French Ministry of Health, for Rama, the university student in Sembène's film, it is an object of suspicion. Rama was right. PVC plastic, we now know as "one of the most toxic substances for inhabitants of our planet. From cradle to grave, the PVC lifecycle (production, use, and disposal) results in the release of toxic, chlorine-based chemicals, and is one of the world's largest dioxin sources."<sup>36</sup> In 2022, the European Union announced a restriction on the manufacturing, utilization, and sale of PVC.<sup>37</sup>

With our twenty-first century eyes, we can see that the 1.5 Liter bottle on El Hadji's desk will not be safely disposed of. If burnt, it will release an acrid toxic smoke into the air, irritating human lungs and entering the bloodstream. If buried, it will degrade in the ground, contaminating the soil and the water, ending up in the crops, the food, and even mother's breast milk. The plastic he venerates will be with his daughter Rama's children, and grandchildren, and perhaps great grandchildren in some form. However, the matter of disposal is just part of the problem of the Evian bottle.

Today, Senegal is classified by the United Nations as a water-scarce country, despite its network of lagoons, rivers, and estuaries, and its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. It is also a country where, due to pollution, "a good part of the population prefers bottled water for their consumption."<sup>38</sup> This dynamic is global. From Michigan, USA to Accra, Ghana, to Manila, Philippines, bottled water takes over the market when tap water is not reliable or safe. When this happens, the responsibility to procure safe drinking water shifts from the government to the individual consumer or the business. When water, essential to life, is defined as a private commodity, who manages its safety or affordability? The violence of the Evian bottle is not solely in the plastic chemicals, but in the capture, marketing, and sale of water as a commodity, a trend that is at cross-purposes with water as a life source. And who will be accountable for the waste material that remains?

Dakar's Mbeubeuss Landfill, at over 114 hectares, is one of the largest open-air landfills in the world. It is overflowing with plastic. As Sarah Walker and Elena Giacomelli write, "it is no surprise" that Mbeubeuss is situated in Pikine, one of the poorest suburbs of the city, a place established in 1952 when the colonial government displaced and removed people from central Dakar to make way for French government, French houses, and French agents.<sup>39</sup> The people who French colonial agents removed from the city as pollutants now must also bear the brunt of the plastic waste that rich countries export as pollution. These histories shape the "spatial inequalities inherent in who produces waste and who gets it."<sup>40</sup> Since the 1980s, African countries have used the language of waste colonialism to sound the alarm about high GDP countries that offload their toxic industries and mounds of waste (often plastic) onto African lands and seas. International agreements have not been able to prevent the unethical and/or illegal flow of waste from Europe and North America to Abidjan, Accra, and Dakar.<sup>41</sup> The plastic that litters Dakar's beaches is just the tip of the iceberg, a visual reminder of waste colonialism's mounting consequences, including migration, illness and death.

36 Marcin H. Kudzin, Dominika Powowarska, Natalia Festinger, Jerzy J. Chrusciel, "Risks Associated with the Presence of Polyvinyl Chloride in the Environment and Methods of its Disposal and Utilization," *Materials* 17: 1 (2023).

37 European Environmental Bureau, *PVC Problem Very Clear* (2024) <https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/pvc-problem-very-clear.pdf>

38 Cheikh Faye, "Water Resources and their management in increasing urban demography: the case of Dakar City in Senegal" in *Resources of Water*, eds. Prathna Thanjavur Chandrasekaran, IntechOpen, 2022.

39 Walker and Giacomelli, "Waste, Space, and Mobility Justice: interconnecting strands of the climate crisis as experienced in Dakar" *Lo Squaderno/ Explorations in Space and Society* 2021: 10.

40 Ibid.

41 Laura A. Pratt, "Decreasing Dirty Dumping? A Reevaluation of Toxic Waste Colonialism and the Global Management of Transboundary Hazardous Waste," 35 *William & Mary Environmental Law & Policy Review* 581 (2011), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmelpr/vol35/iss2/5>

In *Xala*, the plastic Evian bottle is not only a European novelty but a harbinger of the coming waste flood. By representing this crisis Sembène calls out to new generations of thinkers who understand that there is no liberation that does not include the land.<sup>42</sup> If Africa's illustrious knowledge creators, now as ancestors, are still willing to speak to and collaborate with us, we might at least grapple with these enduring critiques. After watching *Xala* (1975) with the gift of my students' eyes, I return to Ousmane Sembène's other films and interviews. I see water everywhere. In *La Noire de...* (1966), Diouana gazes upon a sprinkler languidly weaving across the lawn of her French boss. In the next scene, a Senegalese woman laboriously lifts a bucket of water to her head from the communal tap. In *Faat Kine* (2000), a brief interlude about the love between mother and child is filmed on the shore of a blindingly beautiful Atlantic Ocean. In Ferid Boughedir's documentary *Caméra d'Afrique* (1983) the sound of the crashing ocean punctuates Ousmane Sembène's interviews.

## Returning to Sembène & Sea

"Ousmane Sembène and water— it is an old love story." - Samba Gadjigo (2010)<sup>43</sup>

Water was Sembène's constant companion. "Born on the right bank of the river called Lower Casamance," and raised in a region "cluttered with marsh creeks, locally known as bolongs," water shaped Sembène's sensibility. "He once declared that the early part of his life can be summed up in four words," reports Samba Gadjigo, "swimming, fishing, tree-climbing, and hunting."<sup>44</sup> Gadjigo's 2015 documentary *Sembène!* begins with and returns periodically to a black and white film reel of Senegalese children flipping and jumping in the water. "Palm-trees and coconut trees, marsh creeks overlaid with water lilies, with the half-bent trunk of a Palmyra palm wood that served as a springboard!" reminisces Sembène in his first book, the semi-autobiographical *O Pays, Mon Beau Peuple!*<sup>45</sup> The biographer Gadjigo insists that we should consider Ousmane Sembène's lifelong romance with water to understand all that came after. The revolutionary artist was "a passionate water-lover."

In the film, *Sembène: The Making of African Cinema*, filmmaker Manthia Diawara begins with a walk to Galle Ceddo, the house that Ousmane Sembène built at Yoff, at the edge of the sea.<sup>46</sup> "At Gallé Ceddo, the towering waves of the Atlantic crashing down on the rocks are like so many distant echoes of his childhood in the south, in that native Casamance..."<sup>47</sup> The house itself is a testimony, it speaks in its bricks, its paint, its vistas.

Sembène looks out at the sea while he plans his films. He touches the wooden posts of his patio and says that these form his frame. Instead of a green screen, or white screen, he has the everchanging, roiling Atlantic Ocean as his backdrop. He talks about his childhood riding barges from Dakar to Ziguinchor, the joy of that. He remembers that his father, by his own proclamation, never worked for the white man. He would sell fish to the white man, but never take a job that would require being on the white man's time. This is a meaningful distinction; can one engage in commercial activity and exchange with Europe and Europeans without being on the white man's time? The sea makes it possible, the ocean provides livelihood, sustenance and identity

42 Cajetan Iheka, *African EcoMedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (Durham: Duke University) 2021. Rosalind Fredericks, *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal* (Durham: Duke University) 2018. Stephanie Newell, *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* (Durham: Duke University) 2016. Brenda Chalfin, *Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana* (Durham: Duke University) 2023.

43 Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (2010): 39.

44 Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (2010): 5.

45 Gadjigo, 2010:2.

46 Manthia Diawara, *Sembène: The Making of African Cinema*, 1994.

47 Gadjigo, 2010:18.

apart from the French colonial state and its economic pressures.<sup>48</sup> Samba Gadjigo's biography gives us the filmmaker's life through the land-- the soils, waters, and air-- of Casamance. Here is Sembène beaten by his uncle for swimming in the river, and still he returns to swim again. There is Sembène choosing to fish with his father when he is expelled from school. This is Sembène's determination: I will be a fisherman like my father. The Senegal to which Sembène dedicated his life and directed his voice was not an abstraction. He spoke the language of class and Marx, while reaching for his people, his country-- the marshes, rivers, and sea that formed him, fed him, and stretched his body and imagination.

What animates the African revolutionary artist? Sometimes there is a hunger for money or fame; perhaps there is a desire to occupy the seat of power, to make it big in Paris, or New York. It may be all of the above, an ebbing and flowing desire with many feeding tributaries and digressions. For Sembène, there was a love of the land, a "deep seated attachment" to the actual soil, water, and air of the place now called Senegal. The water that shaped Sembène's childhood fueled and renewed his artistic vision throughout his eighty-plus years. Where are our children still springing and diving into the water? If our country's rivers have turned thick and brown because of galamsey gold-mining, if the ocean vistas are marred by plastic waste from shore to wave, if the fish have dwindled in number, can we refuse the white man's work or time? What will we cherish and fight for if our physical environments have been so degraded? In turning again to the artist Ousmane Sembène, he leads us to the mighty sea.

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48 Gadjigo, 2010.