

Sembène's Road to a Better Africa: A Multicultural and Multidisciplinary Study of *God's Bits of Wood*

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by

Joelle Katrine Thomas

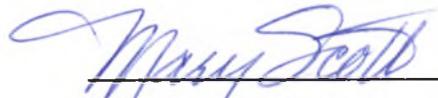
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Sembène's *Road to a Better Africa: A Multicultural and Multidisciplinary Study of God's Bits of Wood* by Joelle Katrine Thomas, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Humanities at San Francisco State University.



Mary Scott, Ph.D.
Professor



Carel Bertram, Ph.D.
Professor

Sembène's Road to a Better Africa: A Multicultural and Multidisciplinary Study of
God's Bits of Wood

Joelle Katrine Thomas
San Francisco, California
2019

God's Bits of Wood, Ousmane Sembène's third and best-known novel, is a fictionalized account of a 1947 railroad workers' strike of the Dakar-Niger railway line. Published in 1960, it conveys a feminist opinion far ahead of its time. The novel culminates in a "Women's March" in which the wives, sisters and daughters of the workers walk from one end of the railway to the other to bring the strike to victory. Unusually, the novel has no single protagonist. Instead, Sembène's many protagonists—men and women, Western-educated and traditional, old and young, Wolof and Bambara—band together into one cohesive force that finally prevails against their oppressors. The characters' understanding of the perils and virtues of education and their embrace of both tradition and modernity are two of the most important themes of this novel.

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Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Humanities is a collection of ideas which encourages critical thought in all arenas of life. The classes offered in this college are often the first ones to be cut when the cost of attendance becomes so high that students are forced to form strict plans to get in and out of university as quickly as possible. The skills trained and honed through the study of Humanities are the ones that our country needs sorely in this time of polarization. Openness, acceptance of others, intelligent empathy and the ability to make cohesive and supported arguments in a calm manner are but a few of those skills. I am fortunate enough to have a wonderful support group both academically and at home. These people have encouraged me to think deeply and to follow through with my often-atypical perspective of the world. Professor Mary Scott, Dr. Carel Bertram, Professor George Leonard and Professor David Pena Guzman are but a few of the academic minds that hold my gratitude for helping me polish my rough academic edges. I am also extremely grateful for those individuals who have helped me realize that learning and critical thinking doesn't have to stop at the classroom by talking with me through every idea and challenge I had during this program, Joe Thomas, Kim Airola-Kinnaman, Linda Dickenson, Robert Higueros and lastly, the man that has challenged my every intellectual limitation and has been the best in-house grammatical editor I could ever ask for, Carlos Higueros.

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And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women.

Ousmane Sembène, *God's Bits of Wood*

Ousmane Sembène deliberately crafted *God's Bits of Wood* to make a several arguments meant to speak to the next generation of Senegalese thinkers. Out of the several statements he makes, three main themes emerged as prominent. His first theme demonstrates both the useful and the detrimental aspects of education that Senegalese and French people had access to: French-run schools, traditional oratory passing of wisdom through stories, or autodidactic efforts comprised of reading books in the colonizer's language. Analysis of Sembène's characters N'Deye Touti, Tièmoko and Ad'jibid'ji, exhibits the possible benefits and perils of education. Sembène reasons that the benefits can best be used for the betterment of Senegalese people if it is tempered with the traditional oral teachings of the older generations represented by Ad'jibid'ji's grandmother Niakoro. The second main theme is found within the explanation of "God's bits of wood," a phrase meant to highlight the nature of equality among people. The novel contains multiple protagonists whose individual accomplishments and sacrifices, when taken together, become effective enough to attain social change. The last main theme is a demand for women's strength, values and abilities to be taken seriously. Sembène shows us several female characters who affect change in the novel through self-sacrifice, hard work, resilience and guts: Ramatoulaye, Houdia M'Baye, N'Deye Touti,

Penda and Maimouna. Education that weaves both traditional and modern forms and the idea that not only every man but every woman in Senegal has the ability to affect social change are the ideas that Sembène imparts on future generations of Senegalese people through *God's Bits of Wood*.

Senegal's independence from French colonialism in the summer of 1960 coincided with the publication of Sembène's third novel, *God's Bits of Wood*. The novel is a fictionalized version of the railroad workers' strike from October 10th, 1947 to March 19th, 1948 for equal benefits between the French workers and native African workers on the Dakar-Niger railway. The story is mostly set in three major cities along the railway: Bamako on the eastern end and Thiès and Dakar on the west. The real railway workers' strike fits snugly within the typical narrative in the histories of colonial and post-colonial Africa that revolutions are made by men. But because Sembène ends the strike with a fictional "Women's March" from Thiès to Dakar, a forty-six kilometer walk to the western-most end of the railway, *God's Bits of Wood* conveys a feminist opinion far ahead of its time. The story does not have a single protagonist. Men and women, Western-educated and traditional, old and young, Bambara and Wolof—band together to form one cohesive force that finally prevails against their oppressors. Yet through this book, Sembène argues for the value of women's wisdom as a catalyst of social and political change and the equal value of older forms of knowing and modern education, and thus presents a possible road to a better Africa through the nationalism born in a young person, travelers, patient wives, a whore, a blind woman and many more.

There is a traditional belief amongst Wolof, Bambara and several other African tribal groups, that counting out and naming the members of any particular group would call attention towards those individuals from evil spirits. Instead, the phrase “God’s bits of wood” is used as a generalized description of a group for the purpose of avoiding any enumeration. Ramatoulaye, the matriarch of a large compound in Thiès, knew better than to “count the members of her household in any but the old way; to give them names might attract the attention of some evil that would fatefully alter their lives” (Sembène 40). During the women’s march, the women’s determination begins to falter, and in response Penda begins to count them out. One woman screams “No, no! Don’t count us, please! We are God’s bits of wood, and if you count us out you will bring misfortune; you will make us die!” (Sembène 196). The title *God’s Bits of Wood* invokes both the importance of retaining traditional views and the innumerable nature of all the protagonists that exist in every corner of Africa. Equality is also implied in the phrase since people lose any unique qualities when quantified into a vague “bit of wood,” there may be short bits of wood, long ones, gnarled ones, fresh ones, but when assessed together they are lumped together as the same.

Ousmane Sembène, an author, producer and film maker, born in 1923 in Ziguinchor, West French Africa, modern day Senegal, is known for his political and social commentary on xenophobia, corruption and oppression. In his novels and films, which showcased the evils of European elites or the corruption of governments, his European protagonists were as varied in character and motivation as his African ones.

Sembène's African characters in both his films and his novels are, instead, strong, capable and even critical to the liberation of the African people from the racist, gender-biased and classist oppression they faced. Sembène portrays both the perils and virtues of education, the struggles between tradition and modernity, the significance of women to society and their contributions to social change and the ability of the ordinary person to affect their country's trajectory. Although a few individuals are more prominent than others, the true protagonists of the novel are the everyday men, women and children who struggled, sacrificed and fought to better their society.

Sembène was drafted into the French Colonial army in World War II as a young man. As a son of a fisherman with virtually no formal education, he went to France to work as a manual laborer, then as a dock worker. After joining a union, the General Confederation of Labor (Confédération Générale du Travail or CGT), he was injured while working as a dock worker. His union ensured that he received appropriate medical care and while recovering in the union's hospital, he spent his time reading in their library. The books he read opened his mind about the injustices of the world while reinforcing for him the importance of being a member of the union. After his recovery, his first published novel, *Le Docker Noir*, came in 1956 in Marseilles. Evidence for the influence of French writing on Sembène can be found in his use of the book *La Condition Humaine* in *God's Bits of Wood*.

La Condition Humaine, a novel written by André Malraux's in 1933, and *God's Bits of Wood* both are set during a time of social unrest and have multiple protagonists

whose stories are interlinked. It is the idea that one must never falter if they are to win that Sembène borrows from Malraux. Both novels depict an anti-colonial uprising inspired by the Communist vision of solidarity and equality among ordinary people, including both men and women. Since it is referenced a few times in *God's Bits of Wood* it is reasonable to infer that Sembène received some inspiration from Malraux's novel, which is anti-colonial but written by a sympathetic French person. In other words, Malraux represents the possibility that anti-colonial movements could find some support among the colonizers themselves, as demonstrated by the character Leblanc through his donations to the strikers, which will be looked at in more depth later. The use of *La Condition Humaine* in Sembène's novel is a nod to the ideals of the French Revolution: **liberté, égalité et fraternité** or freedom, equality, brotherhood. It's an example of an idea that Sembène would have found valuable in French colonial education.

While *God's Bits of Wood* and Sembène's other novels and short stories, written in French, became successful, he felt that he was unable to reach his own people due to language barriers and illiteracy, so he refocused his energy into becoming a filmmaker. While Sembène's first three novels were in French, he was still struggling with the consequences of writing in a language that the people he wanted to speak to could not understand. His choice to become a filmmaker with dialogue in native languages became his answer to that problem. He accomplished this feat with great success and many of his films became world known award winners. He did not limit himself to a critique of the

status quo in his films and novels, but also provided propositions on how the Senegalese people should move themselves forward to a better life as individuals and as a country.

Sembène leaned heavily on his personal experiences for material and often used historical facts and events as springboards for his storylines. The Dakar-Niger railroad strike was a hard-fought battle against oppression and inequality and while it had many successes, Sembène felt that it could have done more. Sembène featured details from Senegal's labor history that spanned fourteen years and condensed it into a one-year timeline for *God's Bits of Wood* (Magno). Sembène was quoted in an interview saying that his right and responsibility as an artist is to "reveal a certain number of historical facts that others would like to keep hidden" (Jones). *God's Bits of Wood* has been called Sembène's magnum opus, a commentary on the importance of the ordinary man and woman in fighting for social change while highlighting the struggles of the individuals and the families that made sacrifices to realize that change.

Though Sembène did not participate directly in the 1947-48 Dakar-Niger railway strike, he kept in contact with the strikers through their weekly reports to the CGT in France. He became a more active member of the union and later, the strike became the basis for his third book *God's Bits of Wood*, arguably his best-known novel, praised for its vivid depiction of African workers' struggle against colonial oppression and exploitation. The historical events surrounding the Dakar-Niger strike, the backdrop to the novel, speak volumes about the political and economic climates of Senegal after World War II. In the 1940s, Senegal had a class of urban wage-earners who became

militant in the post-war climate. There were many new jobs in the transportation, commercial and public work sectors. After the war, high-priced imports and the failure of wages to keep pace with inflation helped galvanize African activism. Urban Africans in Senegal demanded a more complete education because they “had high expectations that their lives would continue to improve once the war was over” (Keller 159).

Beginning in 1945 in Senegal, there were several general strikes that began to emerge with the intention of attaining benefits for African workers equal to those given to French workers of French companies, benefits like higher wages, breaks, family allowances and so on. The Dakar-Niger railway strike was limited to the workers of the railroad company itself, but it seems to have been a continuation of the strikes that preceded it. In *God's Bits of Wood*, the townsfolk and union members often speak of an earlier strike that took place a few years before World War II. Niakoro, mother of labor activist Ibrahim Bakayoko, recalls “a terrible strike, a savage memory for those who had lived through it, just one season of rains before the war. It had taken a husband and a son from her, but now no one even came to seek her advice” (Sembène 2). And Mamadou Keïta, also known as Fa Keïta, or “Old Keïta,” a title given to him for being the oldest man in Thiès, cautions his fellow workers to think long and carefully before committing themselves to a strike, reminding them: “Years ago the men of Thiès went out on strike, and that was only settled by deaths, by deaths on our side. And now it begins again” (Sembène 8). Here, Sembène is referring to an actual historical event: the 1938 railway walkout in Thiès, with its tragic consequences. As colonial soldiers faced down 200 to

300 strikers, “Stone throwing by strikers... led the inexperienced soldiers... to fire. Six strikers died” (Cooper 106).

The origins of the real strike can be traced to a series of events beginning in 1946. There was a general strike in Dakar which succeeded in guaranteeing wage increases, family allowances for government workers, the recognition of unions, the expansion of wage hierarchies, and bonuses for seniority. In that year, 133 unions in the public sector and 51 in the private sector had been recognized by the French colonial government. The Fédération Syndicale des Cheminots (Railway Workers Union) was one of these autonomous and recognized unions (Muñoz). The railways had been part of the Direction des Travaux Publics, but in July 1946 they were transferred to the Régie des Chemins de Fer de l’Afrique Occidentale Française (AOS). This transfer meant that the workers could no longer benefit from the status of civil servants—meaning they could not claim the rights achieved by the 1946 general strike. The Régie’s personnel were also set up in a hierarchical fashion. The lower tiers were filled mostly with Africans, who received fewer benefits. Additionally, most African railway workers, who constituted the majority of railway workers, formed part of the auxiliary section of the hierarchy, which received no housing and no indemnities (supplement to wages intended to offset geographical differences in cost of living). Furthermore, they were generally treated as temporary laborers. Also, the worsening economic conditions took its toll on railway workers’ wages, since their wages were a factor in the cost of goods imported and exported (Muñoz).

The Federal Secretary of the Railway Union, Ibrahima Sarr, began to mobilize the union for their own strike by the end of the summer in 1947. On a visit to Thiès in Senegal, Sarr was “met with dancing and drumming by an assembly of 7,000 supporters,” an act that unnerved the French officials there. Believing that the strike would end on its own because of economic pressure, the administration and politicians took three months to respond. The duration of the strike is explained by the fact that the workers were integrated and received support from their communities. Merchants, farmers, and fishermen supplied money and food. Women of the community also economically sustained the family during the strike period. The women also wrote songs in favor of the strike and taunted strikebreakers (Muñoz). Sembène stays true in *God’s Bits of Wood* to these parts of the real story. In December, minor concessions were offered to the railway union, but the strikers refused them. Next, the Régie tried to simply hire new workers but this did not work either. Only fewer than a fourth of their required jobs were being fulfilled by January 1948. In February of 1948, a new High Commissioner made proposals to the union which were a compromise between both sides, though they favored the union considerably. There was a guarantee that there would be no punishment for striking and finally, on March 19th, the union accepted the proposals and returned to work. The strike ended with a long, celebratory march into Thiès followed by meetings and dancing. Sembène’s fictional version of the strike includes many key details from the original event but it is his depiction of the many characters in it that he has been able to offer his countrymen paths that could have been even more beneficial to the people of

French West Africa. While Sembène may have written *God's Bits of Wood* based on real events surrounding the 1947-8 railway strike, he uses it to serve as a case study for how things could, and should, be: trials instead of beating, education both from elders and schools, equality between men and women and lastly, the value of every individual's efforts when taken together as a whole.

Through Sembène's time working in France, he came to realize that French people were as varied in opinions and beliefs as African people. If he wanted to represent his black characters authentically, then he would have to do the same for his white characters. Sembène recognized that in the Euro-American colonial world, the ideology of racial difference was used to subjugate non-European people and he made sure to include characters like Isnard, Beatrice and Dejean who hold those beliefs. The ideology of race imposes the ruling elite's values on colonized people as a natural and accepted cultural norm (Bullock 186). The ideology of male dominance was used in a similar way. The male ego and its need to claim others as property is part of the cause for this subjugation of others. The depiction of women in many cultures as an object in relation to her patriarchal possessors is directly related to this need as well: she is daughter, wife and mother instead of self. This conduct is not limited to Western societies but is observable in human societies all over the world, throughout recorded history.

Sembène is a novelist, not an ideologue; and he is not a racist: he does not depict either the white nor the black characters in his novels as all heroes or all villains. Instead of taking an easier path of demonizing all white French people, Sembène

characterizes the varied responses of the colonizer to colonized African people's concerns through four main white characters: Isnard, his wife Beatrice, Dejean, and Leblanc. These characters are here to represent that there are different kinds of people among the French. Their treatments of the Africans are not all the same and are not all coming from a place of superiority. Isnard and Beatrice are ignorant, and they imagine all Africans as children in need of guidance and a firm hand. Dejean has a genuine hatred for the Africans exactly because of the color of their skin. Leblanc, whose name translates to "the white," wants to be friendly with and have an honest relationship with Africans but is disheartened by the lackluster response he receives every time he reaches out. The fact that he is an anthropologist is important because it means that he has dedicated his life to trying to understand other people and that he is a recipient of the same kind of education that would have been experienced by Africans attending French-run colonial schools.

Sembène depicts Isnard and Beatrice as French people who genuinely believed Africans were inferior and that the Africans **needed** them and their services in order to succeed. Isnard and Beatrice belittle the African workers as "children who want to learn to walk by themselves" (Sembène 168). Isnard approaches Doudou, one of the leaders of the strike committee, and offers him three million francs towards whatever he pleases in exchange for getting the strikers back to work sooner. Doudou not only turns him down but reminds Isnard that he had once told Doudou that if he and the other African workers wanted a ten-minute tea break like the white men get, then "make yourself white and you can have ten minutes too!" (Sembène 149). Isnard becomes livid "with a face like red

leather” when Doudou tells him that “even three million francs won’t make me white. I would rather have ten minutes for tea and remain a negro” (Sembène 151). Late into the strike, when the tension has built up near the climax, Isnard ends up killing three teenage boys after assuming that they were attacking him after they unload their slingshots on a lizard hiding under Isnard’s jeep. Consequently, his removal from Thiès becomes part of the agreement for ending the strike. His wife Beatrice refuses to accept their fate when they are told to leave. She grabs her African maid by the arm and screams at her to “tell them that you liked us!” “we’re the ones who built everything there is in this town” (Sembene 247). She grabs a gun, runs out into the garden and shoots twice into the gathered crowd in front of their house. She hits a soldier in the leg, he shoots a short burst from his automatic rifle in response and Beatrice is dead. Beatrice loses her life because she could not bear to imagine that there is a flaw in her world view.

Dejean is the only French character depicted as actively hostile towards the Africans. Dejean, the white regional director of the railroad company, openly asserts that the African workers do not deserve any kind of validation by France or his company. Dejean was initially the representative of the railroad company but he often lost his temper because the Africans were undermining his entire belief system by striking. Dejean claims that he is not only a representative of the railroad company but someone who has “the right to an absolute authority over beings whose color made them not subordinates with whom one could discuss anything, but men of another, inferior condition, fit only for unqualified obedience” (Sembène 179). At one meeting, in his

anger, he slaps Bakayoko in the face, effectively ending the session. In Dejean, Sembène recognizes that there are some French people who have bought completely into the narrative of white superiority. In the end, Dejean is ousted from Africa just like Isnard and Beatrice, though he goes quietly unlike them. Sembène recognizes the hatred of some French people but he affirms that it can be beaten as Dejean is in this novel.

Leblanc is a French character meant to represent those French individuals who were as disenfranchised by the French colonial system as the Africans were. Leblanc, a white anthropologist who came to Africa to study, took a job at the railroad company to fund his continuing studies. He turns to drinking after failing to “establish some sort of friendly relationships with the Africans ... He had become a narrow, bitter person, laughed at by the blacks and mistrusted by the whites” (Sembène 166). He is the only French character who sympathizes with the plight of the African railroad workers and constantly tells the strike committee never to trust anything that Isnard or Dejean says. At a get-together in Isnard’s house, he reveals that he has sent two ten-thousand-franc notes to the strike committee in support of their cause. This revelation prompts Dejean and Isnard to decide that they will have the local doctor declare Leblanc “sick,” and have him recalled to France. While Leblanc is ultimately silenced by the more powerful opinions within the French colonial society, he is still able to make a difference by contributing to the strike. French people that fall under the same category as Leblanc, disenfranchised from the French colonial system and sympathetic to the colonized people, exist but do not often manage to be louder than the dominant French voices. Through Leblanc, Sembène

speaks both to those French individuals like Leblanc to tell them that while they may not be able to win, they can still make a difference, and to the African readers that may have become so weary and cynical that they have begun to believe that there is no French person they can trust.

Sembène's own colonial education opened his eyes to the reality that not all white men are the same. Leblanc was educated in France through curriculums similar to those taught in French-run colonial schools. His studies to be an anthropologist made him believe that he could study the African people's cultures and that his interest would somehow make Africans accept him. He later feels weary of his efforts and becomes cynical that he will ever succeed in his efforts to befriend African people. His disenfranchisement with education is only part of the theme surrounding education in *God's Bits of Wood*. France adopted a doctrine of assimilation among the Senegalese, granting French citizenship rights to Africans born in certain regions—namely, the “Four Communes” of Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque, and Saint Louis. African men from these cities could vote, hold political office, and, as “citizens” rather than “subjects” of France, could aspire to professional positions in the social hierarchy (Cooper 51). The doctrine was embraced by many Africans, although they often demanded more assimilation than France was willing to grant. Senegal's African “elite,” which comprised only 5 percent of its population, hoped to achieve equality with the French (Cooper 52). As was the case in many colonized societies, the French still considered the African people as second-rate, regardless of their individual status or educational achievements. N'Deye Touti attended

a French-run school, where she was taught to think of France and Europe as civilized and “superior,” while condemning all things African as savage, ignorant, and primitive thus she vocally disapproves of her family’s actions and traditional views on life. Tiémoko is a stereotypically brutish character who uses an idea from a French book to forever change his society. Bakayoko and his daughter Ad’jibid’ji are autodidacts who have taught themselves new languages and have an entire library of books with which to teach themselves. Lastly, Niakoro is a representation of traditional education that must be recognized as valid and non-mutually exclusive with modern forms of education.

N’Deye Touti’s education was centered on European laws, ideas and geography. Extensive exposure to implicit cultural biases led her to wish to assimilate with the French. She believes that “there was no questioning the truth of anything she learned at the school” (Sembène 111). N’Deye Touti represents the group of Francophiles addicted to the French colonial narrative, which requires her to shun her own culture and heritage. N’Deye Touti’s aunt, Ramatoulaye, refers to her education as having come from “the great school,” a popular phrase among some locals for the colonial French school N’Deye Touti has been attending, while other members of the family question whether N’Deye Touti has been taught instead “to turn [her] back on [her] own people,” (Sembène 112). Sembène turns the tables for her and for the reader when she learns the inability of education to change the prejudice they experience due to the color of their skin.

N’Deye Touti imagines the French leaders in her town as people with whom she can be an equal because of her advanced education, but this fantasy is shattered in a scene

where she overhears several officers speaking about her in French, assuming she cannot understand them. After the second clash between the women of the compound N'Diayène, N'Deye Touti's family home, and the police, the women use fire to scare the horses of the cavalry unit. Part of the neighborhood is consumed by fire born out of the sparks that flew from their battle. N'Deye's disgust is at its peak, and as she surveys the damage that they caused, she is "almost ready to bless the fire which had destroyed the witnesses to childhood and her shame" (Sembène 116). She imagines the beautiful European homes of her books just as she imagined that relationships and romance should be dressing up to going to balls and movies, tidy, civilized and romanticized. Her image of Europe is not a realistic one but instead is from the constructs of her colonial education, the same education that white, especially poor, colonizers like Leblanc are also taught to believe. While N'Deye Touti listens to the three white men— the director of the public health, an officer of the native constabulary, and the chief of police of the district— a woman hikes up her skirt and relieves herself in the middle of the street in full view of everyone. For N'Deye Touti, the "lack of modesty in front of white men seemed like another wound to [her own] pride, and she felt ashamed and ill" (Sembène 117). Her humiliation and fear freeze her when the men shout at her after finally spotting her. Tears of rage and shame flood her when the chief of police tells one of the officers to have a couple of pounds of rice sent to N'Deye Touti after he expresses sexual interest in her. The chief of police remarks "[r]ight now, they'll go to bed with you for less than that" (Sembène 118). N'Deye Touti runs away after this exchange, only to return later to

stand alongside the women of her family against the officers attempting to take Ramatoulaye away for a third time after the first two attempts have resulted in a riot and a fire. N'Deye Touti's character is irreversibly changed after the veil of her propagandized education had been lifted from her eyes.

N'Deye Touti's hopes and learned beliefs are dashed by the realities of life and her problems of the heart crystalize this fact for her even further. Her Eurocentric education taught her that polygamy was wrong while the fact she is Muslim means that she is allowed to do it. Throughout the novel she is torn between Bakayoko, an activist and an organizer of the strike, and Beaugosse, an educated member of the strike committee who quits before the strike is over to work with the French, who is often pressed upon her by family and strangers alike as a good match for her. N'Deye Touti never explicitly turns down Beaugosse but her conversations with Bakayoko make her choice between the two clear. With the courage she gains throughout the hardships of the strike, she asks Bakayoko if he will take her as his second wife. Bakayoko refuses without any explanation. Sembène poignantly describes the changes in her by saying “[a]s the earth hardens beneath the harsh suns of the dry season, the heart also hardens in the flames of unhappiness” (Sembène 226). While this melancholy seems like a disheartening end for N'Deye Touti, it also comes with a new sense of nationalism and love for her country in a way that she has not been able to give another person. She began to push herself to work hard like the men. She became less focused on her appearance and her prospects and spends her time sitting “for hours bent over a schoolbook of

geography, studying out every detail of her country in one map after another” (Sembène 226). In the end, the changes that she experiences shifts her educational focus from colonial ideologies to a renewed passion to learn about her own country.

Sembène does not, however, demonize all colonial education. He displays the power that can come to his African characters from using the tools available to humanity through the study of literature. Tièmoko, a member of the strike committee tasked as the enforcer, is a close friend of Bakayoko. Tièmoko is depicted as a great, uneducated brute from his very first moments in the novel. Five people have broken the strike. As part of his role as an enforcer, it is his responsibility to punish the strike-breakers. The first four are beaten by Tièmoko and the other enforcers, as was customary in that situation. Tièmoko, however, realizes that beatings and violence are no longer effective. His crowning moment in the novel is when he thinks up the idea of holding the fifth strike evader, Diara, to a trial in front of his peers, calling for evidence from the women that Diara kicked off the trains. Tièmoko, the iconic dumb brute and mindless bully, is the first person in the novel to recognize and assert that women’s voices were equal to that of men. The idea of holding a tribunal comes to him from a line he read in *La Condition Humaine*, a book lent to him by Bakayoko: “It is not necessary to be right to argue, but to win it is necessary to be right and to never falter” (Sembène 84). He visits the house of Bakayoko, who, at the time, was travelling to other towns to muster support for the strike, and Tièmoko borrows the French book *La Condition Humaine* again from Bakayoko’s home library.

Tièmoko struggles to verbalize the path they will need to take to evolve as a society. He is ridiculed by the other delegate members of the union for bringing an idea from a French book when he presents the idea of the trial to them during a meeting, but he argues that “[t]here is no law in this book that you would refuse to admit. It’s not an unbreakable set of rules... it’s a way of thinking” and as he continues to argue his point, he is troubled with conflicted feelings (Sembène 87). He argues that using the concepts learned from the colonists’ culture will open their world to the path forward. He declares “it’s a question of doing what is right, and of doing it as men should,” showing a modern-minded care for the future in which Sembène is demolishing the stereotypes of uneducated men, unable to change with their society for its betterment. Through his efforts, Tièmoko finds himself making a difference in the lives of his people, finding likewise through this process “the astonishing discovery of his worth as a human being” (Sembène 89). After the trial, Tièmoko becomes reflective and decides to focus on educating himself more. Although his “physical strength and brutal manner” had previously been his guiding force, “[t]he knowledge of his ignorance gave him no rest” and with new determination, Tièmoko and men like him win the possibility for a new path out of the implied limitations of the “great brutish man” character (Sembène 103).

Tièmoko’s insistence on the trial reiterates Sembène’s recurring message in the novel that violence does not accomplish anything positive. Tièmoko, in his attempt to convince the other council members of the need for the trial, speaks against the popular opinion that “some men are like mules, and sometimes you have to hit them just to make

them move” by saying that with the trial, his goal is to “move forward to the point where it will no longer be necessary to punish men as we have in the past” (Sembène 80,89). During the trial, Fa Keïta, concludes that “blows correct nothing” as he reminds those present that the beatings they have undoubtedly received did not change them, just as the beating he received as a child from his father did not affect him. Through the fictional trial, Sembène affirms that there is much to be learned from the colonizer’s books and teachings, but it must be moderated by an awareness of the typical narratives that are being utilized. While Sembène does not glorify French education and books, he does not disparage them entirely either, reminding his Senegalese audience that they can learn from French ideas without having to consent to being classified as an inferior beings.

Ad’jibid’ji addresses the challenges of being caught directly in between Bakayoko’s home schooling and her grandmother Niakoro’s concerns that traditional African forms of learning is being lost in an increasingly colonized society. Bakayoko’s influence on Ad’jibid’ji’s learning is evident in the multiple languages she has learned and in her letters to Bakayoko. When we first meet Ad’jibid’ji, she is being chastised by Niakoro and her mother, Assitan, for flippantly saying a word in French she had been cautioned not to say. When Assitan lifts Ad’jibid’ji’s dress to hit her bottom, Ad’jibid’ji asks, “is it to hurt me, Mother, or to make me better?” a remark that troubles all of the women present (Sembène 6). She credits her education from her *petit père*, as she calls Ibrahim Bakayoko, for her assessment of punishment and her outlook on the world. Ad’jibid’ji’s outlook and the women’s troubled response is, however, another instance of

Sembène's message about the futility of violence and the significance of education for one's world view. Ad'jibid'ji's back story supports this message even further. She is the child of Assitan and Niakoro's oldest son, who was killed alongside his father in the earlier 1938 strike. Her widowed mother Assitan was remarried to Ibrahim and he adopted Ad'jibid'ji per their cultural customs.

Ad'jibid'ji is the future that Sembène wants for Senegal. Colonial powers have come and gone but their influence will remain. The changes that they have made cannot be so easily erased. Not everything the colonizers have done was bad and if prejudices and hatred are set aside, a new, stronger and better Senegal could arise from the rubble. Ad'jibid'ji has traits that are necessary to do just that. She is mature, quick and intelligent though unrefined and still constantly in search of more information. She knows that as quick-witted and well-read as she may be, she does not know more than her elders. She is always struggling to balance the need to learn more and challenge ideas she does not understand with the respect that she wants to give her elders. When Ad'jibid'ji asks a question to several adults who were unable to answer her, Assitan admonishes her by saying "you must not ask older people about things they do not know. It isn't polite" (Sembène 108). She acknowledges her mother while wiping a tear away.

Lastly, Niakoro is symbolic of older generations and the traditional methods of learning through proverbs, riddles and hard work. Niakoro has wisdom and experience, although her frustrations and difficulties are clear. Sembène first describes her outward appearance with recognizable trademarks of age like her papery thin skin that linked her

body to her head by “threads of flesh,” yet he also mentions a tattoo on the inside of her lip that was “a souvenir of youthful vanity,” reminding us that all old people were once young, an idea that every new generation of young people seem to have difficulty conceptualizing. After painting a physical picture of Niakoro, he credits her as an “ancient countenance” with the “serenity which comes to those who arrive at the end of a hard and virtuous life” (Sembène 1). Niakoro’s body is a physical manifestation of time while her ideas represent that of the traditions of an older generation of Senegalese people. Through her, Sembène is also expressing the frustrations of this generation, feeling like “a leftover from a vanished time, slowly being forgotten” (Sembène 3). Fatoumata, Fa Keita’s wife, and Assitan seemingly ignore the old woman and her ideas of how things should be.

Niakoro, Ad’jibid’ji and their relationship with one another are carefully crafted to reflect their respective generations. Several clashes between Niakoro and Ad’jibid’ji are Sembène’s way of exemplifying possible compromises that can be made to both preserve tradition and encourage modernity. Niakoro expresses fear that Ad’jibid’ji’s interest in the meetings of men is unhealthy. Ad’jibid’ji’s response is that all she is interested in is ideas and that focusing on ideas does not necessarily need to be a bad thing. Ad’jibid’ji insists on using her mind but she never rejects the traditional role of doing housework or listening to and respecting her elders. This fact is not enough to assuage Niakoro’s greatest fear: that Ad’jibid’ji will think about ideas that Niakoro believes should be left to the men. Ad’jibid’ji’s education is a controversial topic within

her household, perfectly displaying the challenges between maintaining tradition and incorporating the progressive ideas of the future. Niakoro is the first character introduced in the novel, and the first scene is filled with her reflections from feeling “the burden of age and memories” (Sembène 3).

Sembène wrote *God's Bits of Wood* and many of his novels and stories in French, but he believed that he needed to find a way to reach his people in their original language. He also understood that the oral nature of their traditions meant that many of his countryfolk could not read and write in French or in their own language. Sembène's shift from a novelist to a filmmaker was his answer to this problem highlighted by Ad'jibid'ji and Niakoro. Ad'jibid'ji knows Bambara, her native language, some Wolof, Niakoro's native language, and French. Niakoro is particularly perturbed by this third language and upon hearing that Ad'jibid'ji has chosen to learn it remarks “I have never heard of a white man who had learned to speak Bambara, or any other language of this country. But you rootless people think only of learning his, while our language dies” (Sembène 4). Writing in French, for Sembène and many of his contemporaries, posed the fraught question of who you're writing for: Europeanized African elites and Europeans themselves, or ordinary African people who speak only African languages. And it also raises the question of whether, by writing in English or in French, an African writer is writing from a colonized subjectivity. In fact, literacy, and foreign language reading, can be seen as a threat to a local community.

Of course, Sembène was not the only African novelist to consider this question, and the question of whether or not to write in a colonial language is still debated. The famous Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for example, views the division of Africa into spheres of European languages in Berlin in 1884 as a "prime example of colonialism's negation of the African heritage" (Lavatori). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also later chose to write in Gikuyu, although he is a specialist in English literature and initially wrote fiction in English.

Niakoro's traditional teaching method is exemplified in a later chapter, where Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji have been left alone by the rest of the women in the household to travel to another town for several days in search of food for the family. In an exchange about language, Niakoro exclaims "[k]nowledge should not belong to children, but to their elders," a nod to Niakoro's representation of the traditional beliefs in their culture (Sembène 100). Ad'jibid'ji makes great efforts not to argue with or contradict the old woman, trying always to remain as respectful as possible without bending her own beliefs. Ad'jibid'ji has extensive knowledge for young girl in her day and age, but the one area where Niakoro retains the upper hand is through her command of stories and proverbs that are remnants of the Wolof oral tradition. Niakoro asks Ad'jibid'ji "what is it that washes the water?" and the child responds by saying "why, it's the water, of course" (Sembène 101). When Niakoro assures the girl that she does not have the correct answer, Ad'jibid'ji responds with gusto that she will make it her mission to find the correct answer to the old woman's riddle.

Ad'jibid'ji does not get a chance to respond further to her grandmother's question because Niakoro is killed several days later. While the old woman and the young girl are still alone, soldiers rush into the house to arrest Fa Keita, who has shut himself in a room for a ritualistic spiritual cleansing. When the soldiers pushed their way into the household, Ad'jibid'ji and Niakoro are a united front. Due to the sudden arrival of the soldiers, Ad'jibid'ji opens the door naked and when she becomes conscious of her nakedness, she first looks down away from the men but when she looks back up, her eyes "held a flicker of hatred" (Sembène 102). When Niakoro makes her way to see what the commotion was, the soldiers knock her down in dismissal of her questions and Ad'jibid'ji runs to her side. As they dragged Fa Keita out, he tries to speak to Niakoro, but he is hit by one of the soldiers, prompting Niakoro to hurl herself at the soldier to protect Fa Keita. With a swift elbow to the chest, Niakoro is knocked back to the ground and Ad'jibid'ji springs forward to protect her grandmother. Ad'jibid'ji is met with the same force landing her a heavy boot to the stomach. Fa Keita is taken away as Ad'jibid'ji and Niakoro are left defeated in the house. Niakoro calls out her granddaughter's name but the girl is immobilized by pain. Ad'jibid'ji looks up just enough to watch the old woman die, before she herself loses consciousness. Despite their two seemingly conflicting ideologies, their love for each other bridges that gap and allows them to converse and find common ground. With the death of Niakoro, Sembène is reminding his countrymen that the wisdom of the old ways and the naked truths of the future must unite them against their oppressors.

The larger conversation about education stresses again the value of many individual “God’s bits of wood” coming together. All forms of education, colonial, autodidactic or traditional, are necessary for the benefit of all Senegalese. Using the tools available to improve one’s entire society can and must be achieved by all common folk. It is this banding together of individual choices to act that Sembène deems necessary, evident in the choice of title. As part of the call for all common folk to act, Sembène highlights the abilities of women to make change. His unusually unsexualized representation of his female characters’ scar-riddled breasts convey the price they often paid with their own bodies to nourish their families, friends and communities. Sembène makes the argument that women are already making sacrifices and are fighting for their communities, but he is simultaneously acknowledging that neither French nor Senegalese people fully recognize their efforts.

In a deeply patriarchal society, Sembène’s female characters often possess a strength of character that challenges dominating perceptions of women as nothing more than weak-minded and weak-spirited possessions of man. Although Sembène frequently refers to the breasts of his female characters throughout the novel, he uses an atypical characterization of women, where the physical descriptions are tied to their socio-economic hardships rather than to their sexuality. For example, When Ramatoulaye is fighting her half-brother’s goat, Vendredi, in her kitchen, most of her clothing is ripped off in an attack by the ram. She loses the knife that she was holding, and she calls to Bineta, wife of Deune and another female member of the N’Diayène compound, to give

her back the knife. Bineta's reaction is to be more concerned with Ramatoulaye's nakedness than giving her a knife to protect herself. Ramatoulaye screams the request for the knife again declaring "I won't die from being naked!" (Sembène 67). Ramatoulaye's naked encounter with Vendredi is a transformative moment for her. When Ramatoulaye is confronted by the police for killing the goat, the women in her compound did not recognize her. She had transformed from "quiet and unassuming" into a strong and defiant woman with "hatred flam[ing] in her eyes." Upon wondering where the newfound strength had come from, Sembène's narrator notes that it had come from "the woman herself. It had been born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen" (Sembène 74).

For another example, Houdia M'Baye is a widow with nine "God's Bits of Wood," whom she struggles to feed, the youngest of whom was christened "Strike," much to her dismay. She wanted to name the child after her husband who died before the birth of their child but the social circumstance when he was born led to several women living with Houdia M'Baye deciding to name him after the strike. After a speech in which Ramatoulaye, matriarch of the N'Diayène compound, says "[r]eal misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty; it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty," Strike begins to cry. "Houdia M'Baye interrupted her journeying in the past to give him her breast—now nothing more than a slack and empty parcel of flesh... The breast was already riddled with scars and pricks that it seems to have been stuck with pins" (Sembène 53). Strike's name makes him a blatant symbolic choice by Sembène of the price women paid to nourish the strike with

their own bodies. Despite her difficult circumstances, Houdia M'Baye's dreams of a better future never wavers. Ramatoulaye finally goes to the police station for killing Vendredi, after two costly fights with soldiers and cavalry that resulted in half of their neighborhood destroyed by a fire. When Ramatoulaye agreed with the French chief of police to meet with him, her half-brother and the local Imam, Houdia M'Baye and Mame Sofi lead the procession to follow and support her, convinced that the French man was planning to deceive or harm Ramatoulaye. As Ramatoulaye entered the building, Mame Sofi instructs everyone to sit in a circle around the building to ensure that Ramatoulaye is not hurt or taken away. Adding insult to injury, women struggling with hunger and thirst are attacked by a stream of water from a firetruck simply for peacefully surrounding the police headquarters. Mame Sofi tilts her body towards the stream countering the effects of the pressure, but Houdia M'Baye is not able to respond quickly enough. The forceful power of the water snaps her neck. She convulsively flails her arms in her efforts to escape the stream of water, ripping her shirt in the process. When it was finally over "she fell on her side, her shriveled breasts drooping out from her body like gourds left too long in the sun" (Sembène 123). Houdia M'Baye's breasts are depicted by Sembène as a physical manifestation of her hardships from malnourishment to death.

Male writers most commonly describe a woman's breast as a focus of erotic interest, but Sembène uses it both as a tool to display the difficulties experienced by his female characters and as a tool to demonstrate the way women see themselves and each other. N'Deye Touti, for example, recalls a time early in her schooling that she called

“her own ‘approach to civilization,’” which for her, coincided with the time that her “young breasts had first begun to form.” She recollects the way that she zealously measured the growth of her breasts each night, torturing herself with “the thought that someday they would fall, and lie flat against her, like those of the older women.” This obsession continued as she secretly watched the older women, observing “how their breasts tossed about beneath the loose cloth they wore.” Even as she outgrew those early years of fixation, she still secretly held contempt for older women and women with children, apparent in her comment that her friend Arame’s features had been hardened by maternity. N’Deye Touti created a brassiere in a sewing class at her French school and she would secretly “measure the growth of her breasts with a finger” every night (Sembène 58). Unlike the description of Houdia M’Baye’s breasts, which was more pertinent to the real and physical effects of the strike, N’Deye Touti acts like a normal girl who is learning to understand her body and the sexuality that her breasts begin to represent for her. Many writers might assume that this way of thinking about one’s own breasts is the only way. Sembène shows us other ways, which also suggests perhaps that N’Deye Touti’s way is “colonized.” A bra, which is depicted as both modern and French in this context, especially one that N’Deye Touti made herself, is a convincing symbol of a colonialized subjectivity. The other African women in the novel do not wear bras, and N’Deye Touti explicitly expresses revulsion for that idea.

N’Deye Touti’s preoccupation with her breasts, a clear sign of her conformity to those European ideals, emerges from the conversation between her two inner selves; the

surveyor and the surveyed. Her personality undergoes a huge shift when the officer and the chief of police call her a “real little filly,” in the moment where she listens in to their conversation after the fire (Sembène 188). This is the moment when it becomes clear to N’Deye Touti that her French education counts for nothing, and that all that matters to the white men is her body, which to them is more animal than human. Through N’Deye Touti, Sembène also reminds his readers that education cannot change a black woman into a white one. The objectification of her by the three white men and the rejection that she receives at the hands of Bakayoko end up changing how she sees the world. N’Deye Touti is a cautionary story of what happens when optimism and dreams get in the way of reality. For Sembène, she is representative of those of his countrymen that believe in the colonial hegemony’s rhetoric and choose not to fight for social change.

In one of John Berger’s essays, from his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, regarding the connection between how a woman is seen and the way that she presents herself, he says that the way a woman presents herself will be surveyed by a man and what he perceives will affect how he treats her. He describes this process as “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” He also says that women are completely aware of this process, so to “acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it” (Berger 46). Through a process of interiorization, a woman must develop both a surveyor and a surveyed within her. She must know how she wants to be seen and consequently, how to act in order to achieve her desired results. This surveyor/surveyed process is present not only between a man and a woman but also between two women. If

Berger's philosophy is to be believed as the dominant European way of seeing, then this is what we would expect N'Deye Touti to have adapted from her French-run school.

Sembène's fictional women's march is a proposition about the value and abilities of women in social and political arenas. Sembène draws a parallel between this march and the women gathering "by fours perhaps, or tens, the infants slung across their backs, the brood of older children following" as they wandered from house to house in search of food. Every starving house they approached would join them in their search while "carrying a baby against a flaccid breast." The implications of both the hungry procession and the march to Dakar is revealed as "the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women" (Sembène 34). The men of the strike face their own challenges in fighting for social change, but as Mame Sofi remarks, men "thought they owned the earth just because they fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them" (Sembène 48). Just like his portrayal of Houdia M'Baye's breasts suggests, women willingly accepted hunger and suffering to nourish their men and their children both literally and metaphorically.

Penda, a character introduced much later in the novel, becomes a spokesperson for the womenfolk, becoming one of the first women to speak publicly to both men and women in Thiès. Penda, labeled as a prostitute for her refusal to marry and her extended unexplained absences from home, begins her journey to becoming the leader of the women's march through being called upon to help with the strike by distributing rations to the womenfolk. Penda is difficult for both the men and the women of Thiès to

understand. She is headstrong and regularly resists men's and women's attempts to control or subjugate her psychologically. At the distribution center, she slaps a man who "patted her on the behind," something that "no one had ever seen before," causing other women to call her names and gossip about her even more than before (Sembène 143). During the attempted negotiations between the strikers and the representatives of the railroad company, Penda and Dieynaba lead the womenfolk of Thiès in song supporting their men. Penda pushes through the crowd to speak and when some men attempt to stop her, Bakayoko yells "[o]ur gallant women have something to say. They have the right to be heard" (Sembène 186). She says "I speak in the name of all women, but I am just the voice they have chosen to tell you what they have decided to do. Yesterday we all laughed together, men and women, and today we weep together, but for us women this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow... we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to Dakar." This was "the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in Thiès" and the response was strongly divided between support and disapproval (Sembène 187). Sembène clearly means for Penda to be a representative of women's voices, their desire for a better future and the inherent strength of will they possess.

Maimouna, the blind woman, develops a close relationship with Penda whose hut Maimouna came to live in after losing her child. Penda's mother died when she was young and her father's second wife Dieynaba adopts her. It is in Dieynaba's compound that Penda's hut is in. Maimouna has twin babies, one girl and one boy. She lives in Thiès

and was in the marketplace when the first riot after the strike began. Within the first few days of the strike, workers gather and quarrel with one another regarding the merits of the strike. While accusations of cowardice and collaboration fly about, a troop of soldiers surrounds them unexpectedly to force them back to work. During the chaos, her son slips away and is playing with the spokes of a bicycle “when a fleeing man seized the handlebar and tried to pull the machine away. The child screamed and the man dropped the bicycle, which fell across the baby’s body... the heavy boots of the soldiers came down on the frame and the rear wheel, whose axle rested squarely on the child’s head. With a little cry, like that of a wounded animal, the wailing stopped” (Sembène 23). Not knowing that her child’s head has already been crushed, she continues to grope around in her search. She is overwhelmed and has to stop her search to protect her other baby. “Her arched back form[ed] a shield” over her, and there she has to stay until the riot ends. In her failure to find her child, she wanders to the nearby house of Dieynaba, where she stays until the women’s march to Dakar. Maimouna’s hair and clothing were tattered and “from her naked breast little drops of red trickled down” onto her clothes (Sembène 26). Eight people, including Maimouna’s child, are killed in the riot while many more are injured.

Maimouna joins the march in the darkness without anyone noticing her, just as the newfound strength creeps into each of their hearts unnoticed. She marches at the head of the procession with Penda and her remaining child slung across her back. By the third day, fatigue begins to set in, and Penda must rally the stragglers. Shortly after they reach

a border of a town whose entrance is blocked by soldiers. The women push on and, in the confusion, shots rang out and two of the marchers were killed, one of which was Penda and the other was Samba N'Doulougou, another striker from the Thiès area, who is then revealed to be the father of Maimouna's twins. While Penda was a driving force behind the march, it proceeds as planned without her and the blind woman whose ears had replaced her eyes, having "learned to know what people are thinking, and to understand what is said between the words spoken," was leading them in their march (Sembène 198). Death, then, connects the two mothers Houdia M'Baye and Maimouna, as the latter becomes a wet nurse for Strike upon her arrival at Dakar, shortly after the women's march and the death of Houdia M'Baye.

Maimouna is a significant character for more than her tragic loss as a mother. Though blind, Maimouna is described as having "her head high, her vacant glance seeming to contemplate an area above people, beyond the world" (Sembène 16). Maimouna's songs are a representation of the oral traditions of her people and she regularly displays knowledge and wisdom that seem not of this world. Her literacy is that of emotions (Lavatori). Through the novel, she sings the Legend of Goumba N'Diaye, "the woman who measured her strength against that of man." Maimouna, like Goumba, is a woman who is strong enough to match the wits of man. There is no easily accessible information on the legend besides what Sembène writes in *God's Bits of Wood*, so it is unclear whether this is a real legend or one that Sembène created himself. In the verse that Maimouna sings in the marketplace before the riots, a stranger asks Goumba

N'Diaye for her hand in marriage and she replies, "My bridegroom must be stronger than I" (Sembène 21). She tells him that her father's fields need harvesting and offers a challenge to see who is stronger. They work on the fields for two months and neither one of them give in. Goumba then asks the man where he is from to which he replies "I am from every country. I am a man like every man," but she responds by telling him that it is not true because "Men are not alike" (Sembène 22). These ideals of equality and individuality further clarify Sembène's feminist beliefs that were uncommon in the late nineteen fifties when he wrote the book: in Africa, among men and around the world.

God's Bits of Wood "portrays the strike as a giant step in a wider popular struggle against colonialism," an impression not universally shared by historians. The strike argues Frederick Cooper, an academic historian who writes about colonized Africa, was indeed "an epic event," but the labor struggle and decolonization, though related, were not one and the same, and "the tension between the two should be preserved" (241). The tension that Cooper refers to is the effect that each event has on the other. Sembène identifies the same tension when Dejean declares that "to give in on the question of family allowances was much more than a matter of agreeing to a compromise with striking workers; it would amount to recognition of a racial aberrance, a ratification of the customs of inferior beings. It would be giving in, not to workers but to Negroes," something that Dejean felt he could not do (Sembène 183-4). Sembène responds to this idea through Bakayoko who says "We know what France represents, and we respect it. We are in no sense anti-French... but this is not a question of France or of her people. It

is a question of employees and their employer,” thus both recognizing and preserving the tension between the labor struggles and decolonization.

It has been a long road since the strike and equality, as Sembène envisioned it, has not yet been attained. His new breed of women, however, seems to have materialized as evidenced by the number of emerging female African writers in a global setting, like NoViolet Bulawayo, Sarah Manyika, Chimamanda Adichie and so many more. It would be easy to imagine any one of these authors as a grown-up version of Ad’jibid’ji. Sembène’s portrayal of the fictional railway strike, though it has many similarities and differences to the real series of events, is not a romanticized version in which everyone involved comes out happy and unscathed. Progress, for Sembène, is messy and must travel along a road pitted with hardships and tragedies. In spite of the pain and difficulty, Sembène reminds us that “hatred must not dwell with you” or be your guidance (Sembène 191, 241). The novel itself ends with another verse about Goumba N’Diaye sung by Maimouna, “[b]ut happy is the man who does battle without hatred” (Sembène 248). It is not any easy thing to ask someone not to hate their enemy, especially one that is actively wanting to subjugate them simply for the color of their skin. This song is placed in direct contrast with the preceding scene of Beatrice Isnard’s hateful outburst that led to her death. Ad’jibid’ji, the little daughter, figures out in the same moment that it is the spirit that washes the water as it is the only thing that is purer.

Education—especially at the hands of the oppressor—has the ability both to better our lives and, at times, make them more difficult. Education can liberate people and give

them the power to envision change or make them complicit in the forging of their own chains or make them targets of others' resentment. It can help people to know themselves, or it can cause them to forget who they are. Sembène calls for a recognition that while independence and equality is a worthwhile goal, the systems that exist are interdependent with the French colonizers. When the strike began in Thiès, it was both a time of suffering and of thought for the Senegalese. It was then that they began to think that "an age had ended—an age their elders had told them about, when all of Africa was just a garden for food. Now the machine ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence" (Sembène 32). The machine—or the train, rules over them just like the French do, but Sembène believes that his countryfolk have the ability to halt this domination, though they also must be cautioned that doing so will likely cause pain, hardship and even deaths. Independence cannot be attained without first addressing dependencies and learning how to use strengths for gain, not the least of which would be to value womenfolk more and preserving tradition while encouraging education that involves critical thinking.

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