Let Them See If We Are Concubines: Transforming Female Social Power in God's Bits of Wood

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Abstract
In God's Bits of Wood, Sembène Ousmane skilfully represents the way that the socialist ideology, in which the labour movement is grounded, not only challenges the colonial structure, it also works to transform other forms of social organization. This type of transformation is exemplified by the changes that take place in the way that female social power is constructed and maintained within Senegalese society as represented in the novel. Through examining the women's march, a clear picture of a new form of female power appears: a female power that is based on each woman's active contribution to their society rather than the social position of their husband or male family member. The article explores how this change takes place and Sembène's vision for the future of women's political action in the context of decolonization.

"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."

In God's Bits of Wood, Sembène Ousmane² skilfully represents the way that the socialist ideology, in which the labour movement is grounded, not only challenges the colonial structure, but also works to transform other forms of social organization. This type of transformation is exemplified by the changes that take place in the way that female social power is constructed and maintained within Senegalese society as represented in the novel. Through examining the women's march, a clear picture of a new form of female power appears: a female power that is based on each woman's active contribution to their society rather than the social position of their husband or male family member. This transformation is not an easy one, there is strong resistance from some of the women, but in the end it becomes obvious that, at least in Sembène's estimation, to resist this change is futile.

Writer and filmmaker Sembène Ousmane's classic novel of socialist realism, God's Bits of Wood, published in its original French version in 1960 and translated into English in 1962, looks back to a period of upheaval during the colonial era, the 1940s, in order to consider the trajectory of anticolonial movements in French colonial holdings. The text centers on a massive strike of railway workers in French-

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² Ousmane is the author's given name but he is credited in the text in the French style (with his last name first) and I have maintained that style here.
colonized West Africa and the events that follow this action. In so doing, Sembène is able to consider the changes to social and political life in the end stages of formal colonialism at a time when the postcolonial future was being envisioned. Sembène’s exploration of the changing roles of women during this period, then, can be considered as a case for the agency and equality of women in the postcolonial African state. In the novel, the women of Thiès begin as passive bystanders who are affected by but have no input in the decision to strike. At first their contribution to the strike is accepted as unconsciously as their housework; it is just an extension of their duties as wife and mother, and, as the narrator points out, “in this country, the men often had several wives, and it was perhaps because of this that, at the beginning, they were scarcely conscious of the help the women gave them.”

This perspective gradually changes, however, and the men come to realize their level of dependence on their wives, “when a man came back from a meeting, with bowed head and empty pockets, the first things he saw were always the unfired stove, the useless cooking vessels...Then he would seek the arms of his wife, without thinking, or caring, whether she was the first or the third.”

The women of all of the towns where the novel is set are also aware of their change in positioning in relation to their men. No longer is it possible for women to keep to the private sphere; their situation necessitates that they go out to find food and water; they must fight for their own survival because the men are not able to do so for them. As the strike wears on, the women are involved in protests and confrontations with the police, over the course of which some of the women are killed. Historically, the creation of martyrs tends to make movements stronger, and this is just the case for the women in the novel. They begin fighting in support of their husbands but as the strike gets longer and the list of casualties grows, the women seem to take the fight up as their own. Soon, what has been described as “the inherent but as yet untapped power of the African woman” begins to come to light. This is why they are able to make the decision to march to Dakar among themselves, without seeking input from the men. If it was simply the men’s fight they would not take the initiative to undertake such an arduous task as a very long march. The women have clearly taken up the fight because they recognize that this strike is not only about wages and work hours, it is about the fundamental lack of acknowledgement of human dignity by the Europeans vis-à-vis the peoples of Africa, women and men. Throughout the novel there is outrage expressed over the Europeans denying the workers family allowances based on their debasement of indigenous marriage practices. When Penda announces the march, she says, “Yes – we will go together to Dakar to hear what these toubabs have to say and to let them see if we are concubines!”

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6 Ibid.
do so in a way that defies both their own society’s and Europeans’ conceptions of how women should behave.

While this change in how women behave is taking place, not everyone is pleased. Resistance to this development comes from both men and women. Many, perhaps most, of the men would prefer the women to keep to their place; they are grateful for the women’s help thus far but begin to realize that if the women are able to undertake such a march, they cannot expect the women to simply go back to the way things were before the strike when it is all over. One of the men says, “I’m against letting the women go. It’s normal that they should support us; a wife should support her husband, but from that to a march on Dakar…” Clearly the men are worried, with good reason, that the women are changing in a way that the men neither anticipated nor wanted.

It is not only the men who are resisting change, however. Two women of Thiès come to represent the struggle between the old order and the new: Penda and Awa. Even before the march is thought up, this conflict is seen at the distribution of the rice. Penda, who represents the changes taking place, is in effect a part of the union because she works with them. Her social power and position are therefore based on her association with an organization in which she demands to be treated as an equal. In the union office, when a man treats her as he might any other woman by patting her on the bum, she smacks him. Here she breaks social convention—women do not hit men in public—but does not suffer for it because she has established a new order. She is given the position of rice distributor because of her strength of character. She also has two assistants who have been rightly interpreted as highly symbolic; “The three generations or age-groups represented signify the participation of the women as a collectivity.” By contrast, Awa derives her social power from the position of her husband. When she goes to get her rice she announces this by stating her husband’s name and position loudly: “Sene Masene, foreman carpenter.” Awa is therefore reacting to what she perceives as a challenge to her social power, being served by Penda who is traditionally lower status than Awa, by reasserting herself through the old order. She chooses to attack Penda by calling her a whore in order to contrast their positioning; Awa is, after all, a first wife to a skilled worker and Penda is a single working woman who spends time (albeit working time) with men to whom she is not married. F. Case argues that Penda “led a life that was sexually liberated and though it was more than once implied that she was a prostitute, there is no proof in the text that these suggestions are anything else but the gossip of women who accept male definitions of sexuality.” But I would argue that there is not even evidence of a “sexually liberated” lifestyle in the text; it

7 Sembène, God’s Bits of Wood, 187.
8 Ibid., 143.
10 Sembène, God’s Bits of Wood, 143.
seems that she is called a whore mostly, if not entirely, because she breaks social conventions in terms of spending time with men to whom she is not related. As Ebele Eko Phylon points out “a situation most often dictates that a woman be cast in the role of a brazen prostitute”\textsuperscript{12}, when she is being positioned as socially deviant. Regardless of how sexually liberated Penda is or is not, it is certain that positioning makes her strong because “she does not have a submissive role to play as a wife and has not been corrupted by Western education”\textsuperscript{13}. This first battle of wills is won by Penda, but it is obviously not the end of the struggle between the old order and the new. Men are present and have a certain level of power in this situation, as they are the ones checking women off of the list; but since women’s society is represented as apart from the society of men from the beginning of the novel, this struggle can only take place outside of the jurisdiction of men and this only has the chance to take place on the march.

It may seem strange at first that Awa and her friends would join the march despite the fact that it represents a system of female power that does not serve their interests, but to not join the march would have been even worse for their cause because it would be a sign that they had totally lost their influence over the other women. Instead, they join the march but use it as a battleground to fight Penda for the hearts and minds of the other women. As soon as the trek becomes difficult, Awa and her cohorts lag behind and eventually stop, refusing to go any farther. The men present are there simply as escorts and are not involved with the action of the march. It is therefore here that the showdown between the patriarchal, class-based system that Awa represents and the feminist system that Penda represents must take place. Case points out the significance of where the women are positioned at this point; Awa and her group make flimsy shelters for themselves on the embankment made for the train tracks, which can be interpreted as “an indication of their continued dependence on the source of their own exploitation.”\textsuperscript{14} Penda, by contrast, has designated a group of trees as the best resting place for the women; these trees, a far sturdier shelter than those that Awa and her group employ, are symbolic of the solidarity that the women must and have begun to develop in order for their transformation to be completed. When Penda demands that the women keep on going, Awa exclaims, “You’re not the one to give orders here! My husband is a foreman…”\textsuperscript{15} Again she relies on her husband’s status to assert sway over the other women. When Penda is unable to deflect this line of argument, she resorts to another form of traditional power to make her case; Awa invokes the spirit world by inferring that there are demons in their midst. Once again, Penda is able to meet her challenge by showing that she too knows the how to make use of traditional practices in order to achieve her ends. Awa’s rebellion reaches its climax when she accuses Yacine of

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\textsuperscript{13} Gyasi, “From God’s Bits of Wood to Smouldering Charcoal,” 181.  
\textsuperscript{14} Case, “Worker’s Movements: Revolution and Women’s Consciousness in God’s Bits of Wood,” 290.  
\textsuperscript{15} Sembène, God’s Bits of Wood, 195.
being a demon—a deumnes. From the pandemonium that ensues, it is clear that this sort of accusation usually holds a lot of sway. Thus, the fact that Penda is able to return order to the group and keep them together enough to complete the journey is a great victory. When Awa apologizes to Penda and Yaciné, we know that among the women at least, the new order has won.

The fact that Penda, like Bakayoko, is not introduced until half way through the text begs the reader to compare the two characters, and this comparison shows the two to be, to a certain extent, mirror images of each other. Case makes a strong case for this comparison in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

It is understandable that Bakayoko demonstrates such deep feeling when it is a matter of the memory of Penda. Like him, she was an outsider. They have both traveled widely outside of their community; they have both come to the realization of the relationship between the local community and the vast colonial region; they have both looked critically at their own societies and that of the colonizer: they have both confronted the colonizer and can see what is degenerate in his civilization and what can be adopted for the good of Africa.16

By comparing these two characters, an interesting difference in the way that women and men are perceived comes to light. Despite the fact that Bakayoko has clearly been unfaithful to his wife, he is never censured for it and it is never seen as something that could impede his ability to lead. Penda, on the other hand, must constantly contend with accusations that she is a whore, despite the lack of evidence provided that she is in fact "sexually deviant" in this way and it is regularly asserted that this makes her an improper leader. Thus, though change is taking place, it is clearly happening slowly and not without some social impediments.

The final aspect of the text that needs to be considered in relation to the changing social organization of women is the death of Penda. As the leader of the women, she was a vital part of all of the changes that took place once the women became involved in the strike. Considering this, the reader feels compelled to question the purpose of killing her. The answer to this is found in the events that take place after her death. Once Penda has died, the women maintain their ranks and continue their march into Dakar; "but how could a handful of men in red tarbooshes prevent this great river from rolling on to the sea?"17 Indeed, even after the women return from their journey they continue to organize themselves in the way that they developed during their trek. In his letter to Bakayoko, Lahbib writes, "in the future,

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16 Case, "Worker's Movements: Revolution and Women's Consciousness in God's Bits of Wood," 281.
17 Sembène, God's Bits of Wood, 204.
though, we will have to reckon with them in whatever we do.”¹⁸ All of this explains why it was necessary for Sembène to have Penda killed off; the fact that the women continue to carry on the process of change that began with the help of Penda after she is dead shows that they do not need a charismatic leader to keep them on the right track. Each of the women has taken up the process of change and is clearly unwilling to return to her previous form of social organization where her power was contingent on her relationship to a powerful man.

The lives of the women of Thiès are transformed by the strike despite resistance from both men and women. Sembène clearly believes that socialist ideology and practice has the potential to significantly improve the lives of African women by offering them agency and models for social organization that affirm that agency. By the time the strike is over, women function like an autonomous collective. All of this comes about in part by the leadership of a woman who is considered to be very low on the traditional social scale. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the structure of female social power has begun the process of transformation; though not everything has changed, the women are moving in a positive direction that will not only lead to their independence, but also to the independence of an entire continent.

¹⁸ Ibid. 228.
Works Cited:


