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Matatu is firmly committed to supporting democratic change in Africa, to providing a forum for interchanges between African and European critical debates, to overcoming notions of absolute cultural, ethnic or religious alterity, and to promoting transnational discussion on the future of African societies in a wider world.

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Spheres Public and Private

Western Genres in African Literature

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Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*

The Anatomy of a Strike and the Ideologeme of Solidarity

Abstract

Using Fredric Jameson's instructive term 'ideologeme' as a theoretical instrument, this essay discusses the philosophical and pedagogical implicationts of Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* for current scholars and students of world literature. The author suggests that if we read solidarity as the defining ideologeme of the novel, then current readings of it can be instructive for learning modes of resistance against the dominant order in the current phase of neoliberal capitalism. The author thus builds on earlier critical engagements with the novel but attempts to open it up to a more nuanced theoretical discussion and a praxis-oriented re-reading.

> The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose structural characteristics may be described as its possibility to manifest either as a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system. An abstract value, an opinion or prejudice – or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes in opposition.[1]

Published in French in 1960, Ousmane Sembène's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* [*God's Bits of Wood*] serves a two-pronged purpose of representing a narrativized, particularistic account of a strike while also offering certain universal aspects of class struggle. This dual focus on the local and the global makes the novel a perfect didactic instrument for teaching resistance in the current state of neoliberal capital. Using Fredric Jameson's concept of the 'ideologeme', this essay discusses the novel's attempt to represent the 1948 Dakar strike as a clue to learning the absolutely necessary preconditions for successful resistance in the neoliberal regime of high capital.

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[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1981): 87)

While theorizing the term 'ideologeme', Jameson asserts that it can be either "the finished appearance of a philosophical system on the one hand, or that of a cultural text on the other."[2] Under such circumstances, the critic's role is "that of the identification of the ideologeme, and in many cases, of its initial naming in the instances where for whatever reason it had not yet been registered as such."[3] Hence, reading Sembène's novel as a realistic representation of a real-life event – the strike – and the affective value of this reading first begs the question of its protonarrative, its ideologeme. I suggest that solidarity is the overarching ideologeme of the novel. The novel as a finished product, using the raw materials from a real-life event, teaches the reader that no resistance movement can be successful unless it achieves a high degree of legitimacy in praxis in the shape of lateral solidarity of the oppressed against their oppressors. In a way, then, the novel stages the creation and sustenance of such solidarity in its setting but also provides us with a sort of metanarrative for learning the importance of solidarity in all other aspects of class struggle.

Much has been written about the novel from various important and insightful perspectives, and my intention is to build on this rich critical reception of the novel to re-articulate the importance of the novel's ideologeme for our times. With regard to the didactic role of the novel for its immediate audience – the Senegalese workers – Victor O. Aire suggest that the "theme of education, didacticism one might call it, runs all through the novel. It is a question of educating the masses, from the children to the most reactionary of the elders, teaching them to take their destiny in their own hands."[4] Emphasizing the all-important role of "demystification" in the classical Marxian sense, Aire also suggests that the novel attempts to teach the masses to "expect no succour from the politicians and to question the sincerity of their spiritual leaders."[5] This reconfiguration of the popular view of the temporal and spiritual power-structures, for Aire, is the minor didactic function of the novel. In Aire's view, the most important function of the novel is to "re-educate" the masses to be critical of "the mentality that perpetuates [...] ancient modes and laws such as

[2] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 87.

[3] *The Political Unconscious*, 87–88.

[4] Victor O. Aire, "Didactic Realism in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 11.2 (1977): 287.

[5] Aire, "Didactic Realism in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*," 289.

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[7] Jean-François Lyotard, *The*
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the dictatorship of the gerontocracy and the subjugation of women."[6] This claim about the novel as a tool for 're-education' certainly makes sense only if the novel's primary diegesis – re-education – in itself becomes a clue within a hermeneutical didactics that must go beyond the novel itself, for the characters of the novel reach this consciousness as historical fictional characters and cannot necessarily be read as the recipients of this re-education. Thus, it is safe to suggest that the novel's primary diegesis and the actions of its characters should be read and taught from the point of view of their use-value for the readers of today and the future. Such a didactics, I suggest, will have to combine the "pragmatics of narrative knowledge" and the "pragmatics of scientific knowledge" as discussed by Jean–Francois Lyotard in a slightly different context.[7]

Narration, for Lyotard, "is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one" (19). He further suggests that "the narratives allow" their host society "to define its criteria of competence" and enable it to "evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it" (20). In the pragmatics of narrative, however, the narrator does not need a justification for or validation of his/her claims to truth, as the status of the narrator as 'sender' and of the listener or the 'addressee' is predetermined by the pre-existing social bond within which the story is told, or, in Lyotard's words, the "diegetic reference of other narrative events" (20). The pragmatics of scientific knowledge, however, function differently – here, the 'sender' makes a statement of truth, but the listener must validate that statement. Thus, scientific discourse requires "the collective approval of a group of persons who are competent on an equal basis" (24). According to Lyotard, "didactics is what ensures that this reproduction takes place" (24). Thus, in scientific discourse the researcher or teacher, while making his knowledge available to his/her students, is also instrumental in transforming his/her students into equals who will eventually be competent enough to validate or challenge the teacher's assertions (25).

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[6] Aire, "Didactic Realism in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*," 289.

[7] Jean–François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (*La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, 1979; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984): 18–23, 23–27. Further page references are in the main text.

Keeping in mind this brief discussion of Lyotard's insightful discussion of the didactics involved in scientific education, one could attempt to merge the pragmatics of narrative knowledge and that of scientific knowledge in order to transform discussion of *Gods Bits of Wood* into a dynamic or, as per Paulo Freire, a dialogic experience. The novel comes to us as a statement: within the context of its characters, it requires no validation, as their shared experience needs no elaboration. Also, the author's *auctoritas* as a speaker of truth is already couched in his own placement within the host culture, so that he can tell his story without any need for immediate legitimation from the 'listener'. But we as the readers who are not part of the author's referent must first master the required cultural competency to tender any responsible view of the novel. This competency, I suggest, can be traced in the didactic function of the novel itself, which can be clearly facilitated if we could, somehow, define the novel's ideologeme. As stated above, the particular ideologeme of the novel can be read as solidarity. I use solidarity here in the specific way in which Paulo Freire explains it in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For Freire, social transformation occurs when people "perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting."[8] Freire also asserts: "The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity."[9] It is this important lesson about the need for collective action and solidarity that, as the novel's leading ideologeme, makes it into a highly relevant didactic instrument in our own times. In the diegetic totality of the novel, all facets of society must come together, at least in their opposition to their French masters, in order for the lived conditions of the community to change. The novel, I suggest, stages this convergence of various strands of the native urban society in its primary diegesis.

The novel has also been quite popular with feminist critics. In an acute feminist, materialistic reading of the novel, Karen Sacks observes:

> Just as the railroad pulled African male workers together against the French, the strike pulled women together, first with the men, then among themselves, and finally against the French.[10]

[8] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, tr. Myra Bergman Ramos, intro. Donald Macedo (*Pedagogia do oprimido*, 1968; tr. 1970; New York: Continuum, 2004): 85.

[9] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 85.

[10] Karen Sacks, "Women and Class Struggle in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*," *Signs* 4.2 (1978): 364.

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Hence, according to Sacks, what started as a male-dominated strike ends up being the material cause for reconfiguring gender roles to such an extent that women's actions, considered auxiliary in the beginning, become the core cause of the eventual success of the strike. According to Sacks, it is the final march of women from Thiès to Dakar that changes "what began as a battle of railroad workers against the French into a working-class struggle of men and women against colonialists."[11] Both Sacks and Aire, as is obvious, read the novel as a point of arrival, a site where the urban sub-proletariat of Sembène's novel gains a new consciousness through the imperatives of material circumstances forced upon them due to the strike. The novel, however, as I suggested at the start of this essay, can also be read beyond its immediate scope to study the very anatomy of a labour strike and to theorize the central importance of class solidarity in challenging an existing mode of production.

The workers of the Dakar–Thiès strike are not necessarily a fully realized proletariat, but they have reached a certain threshold in the capitalistic mode of production where their very existence depends on the railroad. This dependence is not just a matter of their terms of employment and the nature of their labour but also what the trains bring to these communities, their means of subsistence. The strike, therefore, is also about making a class transition from an urban sub-proletariat proper to an accepted class in itself. This transition cannot be accomplished without broader solidarity. It is this attempt to create greater consolidation that can be read as the main ideologeme of the novel. But, first, a brief overview of the history of the strike itself. Seeing the series of African strikes as symptoms of the collapse of colonial hegemonic structures, Frederick Cooper suggests the following:

> The continued strikes in Africa were both a disruption of the economic project and an embarrassment to the ideological one. They represented a telling instance of the "powerless" making the "powerful" reconfigure both ideology and apparatus of government [...]. French officials, in particular, thought that an infusion of capital, planning, and technical assistance would be comparable with allowing African societies to evolve in their own milieu, without the dangers of proletarianization. That was not to be.[12]

[11] Sacks, "Women and Class Struggle in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*," 368.
[12] Frederick Cooper, "The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor

Thus, for Cooper, the African strikes challenged the very ideology – industrialization without proletarianization – upon which the edifice of colonial rule was structured. While the workers asked for equal rights and equal pay, they also, in the process, transformed themselves from the condition of a voiceless sub-proletariat to the proletariat proper, with the mobilizing power to challenge the status quo. In such an historical setting, the Railway Strike of 1948 was even more instructive. Cooper provides the following details:

> The Dakar strike was followed by the massive railway strike in all of French West Africa from October 1947 to march 1948. This strike of some twenty thousand workers revealed that the combination of union organizing and the networks among railway workers could bring about collective action over a vast space.[13]

Needless to say, these "networks" were made possible through the very infrastructure – the railways – that the masters had built to transport their goods across their African colonial holdings. Thus, in a nutshell, it could be said that the collective action of the workers depended on the infrastructural realities and that the work-force structure itself became a major mobilizing impetus in the success of the strike. Sembène's novel captures this particular aspect of the strike and posits solidarity as the ultimate ideologeme of a successful strike. The narrative becomes a didactic tool for learning from the colonial past about the present and future of popular mass movements against oppressors of all kinds. At this juncture, a brief discussion of the novel's progress through the experiences of its main characters and the mobilization of popular resources should prove fruitful.

Within the diegetic topography of the novel, three places come across as the most important nodal points of the strike: Bamako, Thiès, and Dakar. These spatial markers are important enough for the diegetic world of the novel for them to be used as the main titles of the various sections. The plot of the novel relies on the particular location of characters in these three regions, which are spatially connected by the railway tracks, hence become the three major nodal points for the ideological and material structuring of the strike

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Movements in Postwar French Africa," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper & Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997): 412.

[13] Cooper, "The Dialectics of Decolonization," 414.

itself. The novel starts in Bamako, in the Bakayoko household, and in the very first chapter the reader becomes privy to the thoughts and perceptions of two characters: Grandma Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji, her granddaughter. Niakoro's reflections come to us as memories of a harsh colonial past and the changed circumstances of the present. We find her reflecting about the nature of generational relationships and about the news of an ensuing strike:

> In her time the young people undertook nothing without the advice of their elders, but now, alone, they were deciding on a strike. Did they even now what would happen? She, Niakoro, knew; she had seen one. 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. Were the ways of the old time gone forever? Ibrahim Bakayoko, her own son, had told her nothing![14]

There is a twofold richness to Niakoro's thoughts – the loss of the old ways, and the memory of another strike – both pointing to changed material conditions. One could construe from her thoughts that the local culture of Bamako has already undergone transition from a traditional society with its own normative structures to that of an amorphous state where the people have lost their traditions but have not yet formulated the normative class customs of an urban proletariat. We can also discern from her musings that, unlike the ideologically driven youth, her memory is already haunted by the tragedies caused by another strike, one that was put down so brutally that people of her generation could not even imagine living through the same circumstances. Strike to her is a personal memory, the 1938 Dakar–Niger line strike which resulted in "six dead and thirty wounded";[15] two of the dead, we learn, were Niakor's husband and son. Thus, couched in the musings of Niakoro are the traces of loss of tradition and a fear of reprisals from the French in the event of a strike; however, as the normative structures that would have made her an agent in the decision-making process of the strike no longer exist, she is thus, it seems, reduced to the role of an aged bystander. Her granddaughter, Ad'jibid'ji, by contrast, represents the future of their particular subculture. Not understanding

[14] Ousmane Sembène, *God's Bits of Wood*, tr. Francis Price (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu: Banty mam Yall*, 1960; London: Heinemann, 1970): 4. Further page references are in the main text.

[15] Michael Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1968): 440

much of what is happening, she is still a constant witness to the proceedings of the worker's meeting as they decide on strike tactics. Also introduced in the first chapter is the character of Ibrahim Bakayoko, a person in the vanguard of the workers' union, but mostly absent from the story until towards the end. Thus we learn that while the strike must have a visionary leadership, the day-to-day activities of the community do not necessarily depend on the constant oversight of this particular vanguard: the strike is mostly a popular action based in the material conditions and ensuing solidarity of the people, in which all, including the leaders, play important, interconnected parts.

From the very start, it becomes evident that the workers are up against the might of the imperial administration, and as they are detached from what could be termed a rural and to some extent self-sufficient mode of life, the decision to strike is likely to cause great suffering. Also evident is the fact that the French would try all possible repressive and ideological means to break the strike. Under such circumstances, the strike can only succeed if the people develop an all-encompassing sense of solidarity. This solidarity, the main ideologeme of the novel, is not mandated by the local leaders, though they do play a role in it; instead, within the novel's primary diegesis it is the material conditions themselves that are instrumental in creating this sense of solidarity. Thus, while the individuals and sub-groups mount their own particular forms of resistance, the ultimate end-result of these local resistances is a cumulative force-field that impacts on the colonial power-structures. It is this aspect of the strike that I will now discuss briefly. The decision to go on strike is staged as a public meeting, partly shared with the reader through Ad'jibid'ji's consciousness, and it is in this public meeting that one learns, through the public discussion of the strike, the grievances, the possible consequences, and the ultimate strike-breaking strategies that might ensue after the decision to strike is made. Here is how Mamadou Keita explains the situation:

> It is true that we have our trade, but it does not bring us what it should. We are being robbed. Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between ourselves and animals. Years ago the men of Thiès went out on a strike, and that was only settled by deaths, by deaths on our side. And now it begins again. At this very moment meetings like this one are taking place from Koulikoro to Dakar. Men have to come to this same platform before me, and other men will follow. Are you ready to call a strike – yes or no? Before you do, you must think. (8)

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The speech is instructive on multiple levels: one learns through Keita's remarks that the memory of the 1938 strike is still alive for his generation, and the ensuing strike, in their eyes, is likely to have the same negative outcome. On the other hand, there is a clear grievance against their employers, and the workers are aware of the cheapening of their labour. This particular meeting of the railway workers is not an isolated event but is coordinated in different cities, at different nodal points; hence the basis of the strike is clearly posited in creating this lateral solidarity. The last sentence is in itself instructive, for it forces the people to base their praxis, in the ideal Freireian sense, on reflection and not just blind passion.

Historically, it is quite evident that the railway strike was fairly well coordinated. Frederick Cooper offers many instances of lateral solidarity in all walks of life:

> The security services gradually learned that railwaymen had a complex web of affiliation within the communities in which they lived. [...] Other reports suggested that merchants in Senegal played a particularly important role in providing assistance, in the form of money, food and trucks to transport foods. [...] In November, the union was providing 300 francs to any striker who asked for it. 200, 000 francs had been paid out in Abidjan, 100,000 each at Port-Bouet, Grand-Bassam, Agboville and Dimbokro.[16]

The grievances about the condition of the workers are laid out clearly by another character, Tiemoko, when he interrupts Mamadou Keita to say:

> 'We are the ones who do the work,' he roared, 'the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? [...] In what way is a white worker better than a black worker? (8)

Tiemoko's outburst is clearly expressed in terms of the relative inequality suffered by the black workers. This knowledge of the unequal distribution of resources is essential in mobilizing the workers against their employers. In fact, according to John Rapley, "Regimes can sometimes survive prolonged accumulation crisis if they maintain a distribution regime that is widely perceived as fair. In contrast, even within periods of booming prosperity, the

[16] Frederick Cooper, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947–48 Railway Strike in French West Africa," *Journal of African History* 37.1 (1996): 94–95.

failure of a distribution regime can bring the whole regime down."[17] Thus, the workers at this particular meeting are aware of their own exploitation, but are also aware of the relative exploitation of their labour in comparison to their French white co-workers. The issue of the strike is, then, more nuanced, as it aims to erase this inequality. Thus, at the end of the meeting "A vote was taken, and the strike was called unanimously, for the next morning at dawn" (10). In terms of its didactic value, then, the novel, through its primary diegesis, already comes to us as a loaded text that we must read as what Edward Said calls the "heroic first readings," which involve, besides other things, "allowing oneself to experience the work with something of its primary drive and informing power."[18]

Thus, from the very start of the novel, strike is its central theme: what follows is the consequences of the decision to strike, and the varied experiences of the novel's different characters teach us the material consequences of a decision of such significance and also impart to us the knowledge of the absolute necessity of building resilient popular solidarity, to be mobilized against the oppressive power of the colonial regime.

Not surprisingly, the strikers are immediately faced with various kinds of swift, severe, and reactionary colonialist responses. The material reality of these responses and their effects on the people in themselves become grounds for the creation of solidarity amongst the strikers, their families, and their sympathizers. As the events of the strike unfold, Sembène represents the very construction of this solidarity-in-the-making in all of his three chosen sites: Bamako, Thiès, and Dakar. In Theis, the mood at the beginning of the strike is reflective; Sembène presents it as follows:

> And so the strike came to Thiès. An unlimited strike, which, for many, along the whole length of the railroad, was a time for suffering, but for many was also a time for thought. When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the savanna, they realized 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 machines ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious

[17] John Rapley, *Globalization and Inequality: Neoliberalism's Downward Spiral* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004): 31.

[18] Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 67, 68.

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The material existence of the railway effect on the inhabitants of these three i one could argue, is like the *pharmakor* the native inhabitants. Thus, this most logized modernity introduced by the Fr lations. The railway system "serves as nial presence and its continuity in the r erasure."[19] But the train as a symbol a work across space also become, in an i ture in mobilizing resistance. Besides i tem also creates a certain imaginary captures in the following words:

> When I am in the cabin of my engine,
> with everything that is in the train, no
> freight. I experience everything that h
> stations I observe the people, but once t
> thing else. My role then is nothing ex
> where it is supposed to go. I don't know
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This symbolic of resistance is clearly r ing lateral solidarity amongst the striker Interestingly enough, the train itself be strike, for this must present itself as ar people. This union or absolute solidarit and transcends generational as well a more importantly, is developed not sin ment but, rather, as an organic develop of a common plight under the material

[19] Marian Aguiar, "Smoke of the Sava Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*," *Modern F*

> also of their dependence. They began to understand that the machine was making of them a whole new breed of men. It did not belong to them: it was they who belonged to it. When it stopped, it taught them that lesson. (32)

The material existence of the railway system certainly has a two-pronged effect on the inhabitants of these three interconnected cities. The train system, one could argue, is like the *pharmakon* – poison and cure – decided only by the native inhabitants. Thus, this most enduring material signifier of technologized modernity introduced by the French is in itself a site of varied articulations. The railway system "serves as a reminder of the history of the colonial presence and its continuity in the region, representing a way of life under erasure."[19] But the train as a symbol and the railway line as a material network across space also become, in an important way, the enabling infrastructure in mobilizing resistance. Besides its material existence, the railway system also creates a certain imaginary of resistance that Ibrahim Bakayoko captures in the following words:

> When I am in the cabin of my engine, I take on a sense of absolute identity with everything that is in the train, no matter whether it is passengers or just freight. I experience everything that happens along its whole length. In the stations I observe the people, but once the engine is on its way, I forget everything else. My role then is nothing except to guide that machine to the spot where it is supposed to go. I don't know any longer whether it is my heart that is beating to the rhythm of the engine, or the engine to the rhythm of my heart. And for me, that is the way it has to be with this strike – we must all take on a sense of identity with it. (208)

This symbolic of resistance is clearly rooted in an idea of total and unflinching lateral solidarity amongst the strikers as well as the rest of the community. Interestingly enough, the train itself becomes a model for the progress of the strike, for this must present itself as an unfractured, united movement of the people. This union or absolute solidarity is achieved on all levels of the strike and transcends generational as well as class and regional differences, and, more importantly, is developed not simply as a top-down ideological movement but, rather, as an organic development of solidarity through the sharing of a common plight under the material conditions created by the strike.

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[19] Marian Aguiar, "Smoke of the Savannah: Traveling Modernity in Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.2 (Summer 2003): 286.

Thus, as the strike unfolds, all aspects of a colonized life become subject to the demands of a new socio-political order structured specifically by the strike itself. The early involvement of women in the strike is staged through their actions and trials inside the household – the realm of native culture – and extending to their experiences outside in the public sphere of colonial power. The material cause of the mobilization of women, Sembène, suggests, was "born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen" (74). Thus, the strike and suffering caused by the French blockade, instead of quelling resistance, become the causative factors in creating and sustaining revolutionary consciousness. It is with this new-found strength that Ramatoulaye and other women face the policemen:

> 'Go away now,' she said in French. 'This is a house for us, not a house for white men. [...].'
>
> On all sides of her the other women began brandishing bottles filled with sand, flatirons, and clubs of all sizes. In a few minutes the group of policemen was completely encircled. (74)

Thus, as the colonial machinery unleashes its repressive power through direct and indirect expressions of absolute power, the community, on all levels of the class and gender divide, comes together, for it is in the very nature of the material conditions of the strike for everyone to learn that the only chance they will ever have is in standing together in solidarity. Thus, without a vanguardist attempt to create and enforce collective action the material existence of the strike in itself becomes an enabling condition for wide-scale solidarity. Just as the women take on the increasingly important role of providing for their families, even the children join the strike by enacting their own rebellion. Their actions include "raiding the chicken coops of the white men" (156) and stealing rice from Aziz, the Syrian shopkeeper, and they eventually culminate in a campaign of harassment in which "everything that shone in the night [in the white quarter] was target, from windows to a lamp posts" (159).

It would be safe to say that, owing to the material conditions of the strike, a new native narrative – the narrative of solidarity in a strike – emerges, and eventually all the inhabitants of the urban slums come to learn this narrative in the classic sense as explained by Lyotard – a sort of narrative that does not need to legitimize itself, as its place as a valid narrative in a community of equally competent participants is already predetermined through an agreed tradition.

The strike and its representation are not just a pure native fantasy. For the characters of the novel, the strike also becomes an enabling condition in the process of learning strike strategy and the consequent raising of consciousness. Just as the strike leadership is happy to receive the meagre but important financial support from the French unions, in the day-to-day policing of the strike the enforcers have no qualms about learning a new, European mode of justice and policing. This aspect of the strike is highlighted through the actions of Tiemoko, who forces the strike leaders to move from a mode of popular justice to a more formalized system of justice against the strike-breakers. His attempt to learn the mode of justice from a French book and then from the trial itself is a good example of developing a hybrid mode of dealing with the questions of native justice, as the trial combines a formal trial setting with the native concept of shame.

Tiemoko is assigned the task of the enforcer from the very beginning of the strike. It was under his leadership that

> The first two strike-breakers were trapped in the Place Maginot. [...] There was a brief scuffle, and then the men of Tiemoko's commando group had taken them to their own homes and administered their rough form of justice. (81)

Similarly, the punishment of the other two strike-breakers was made into a "public example" (81). But obviously Tiemoko is not satisfied with this rough form of popular justice; he seeks to formalize the process, to give it more legitimacy. The thought-process starts after Tiemko recalls a phrase that he had read somewhere: "It is not necessary to be right to argue, but to win it is necessary both to be right and never to falter" (84). When he keeps reciting this line to his cohorts, one of them even asks: "Are you reciting the Koran?" (84) – traditionally, this could have been the ideological source in a purist archaeology of native agency, but, as we learn later, the phrase actually comes from a French book, *La Condition Humaine*.[20] Thus, it seems that within the enabling conditions created by the material realities of the strike, the most passionate and action-oriented participant has no qualms about seeking guidance from the works of a French socialist and his account of another revolu-

[20] Translated into English as *Man's Fate*, André Malraux's novel *La Condition Humaine* (1933), an account of the failed communist revolution in Shanghai, captures the day-to-day anxieties and struggles of the participants.

tion, in China. The reason Tiemoko searches out this book is to learn a better mode of dealing with the strike-breakers. This attempt to learn from the masters the art of dealing with native problems suggests that the strikers' approach to the problem is more of a bricolage, in which using all necessary means for the good of the strike and the people is sanctioned. Hence, when Fa Keita objects that the "book was written by the *toubabs*" (87), Tiemoko replies:

> And the machines were built by the *toubabs*! The book belongs to Ibrahim Bakayoko, and right here, in front of you, I have heard him say that neither the laws nor the machines belong to any one race! (87)

What is staged in this brief encounter over the procedural aspects of an emerging transition from popular justice to a more systemized form of justice is the very crux of a new reality created by the strike itself. The strike occurs because the train system had created an urban sub-proletariat that depended on what the trains brought but also on the means of livelihood that the rail system provided. Hence, the creation of the railway system is the necessary precondition, in the Marxian sense of the term, without which solidarity among the strikers will be impossible. Just as the strikers are a product of the system that shaped them into an urban sub-proletariat, certain other systems of thought from the *toubabs* can also easily be appropriated for the success of the strike and for the good of the community. The trial of Diara, besides being an attempt at formulating a system of justice, is also an example of combining the urban elements of the strikers' material existence with the aspects of their deep, and mostly diminished, native cultural memory, for what Timoko desires is to "move forward to a point where it will no longer be necessary to punish men" (89) arbitrarily in the streets. The formalized structure of the trial is, therefore, absolutely necessary to give credence and legitimacy to the system of power established during the strike.

Diara, a ticket collector, is not just a strike-breaker, he is also on trial for what could be construed as treason against the community. The charges brought against him suggest the dual nature of his offence:

> Diara is a worker, like all the rest of us, and like all the rest of us he voted for the strike. [...] but he has not kept his word. He got help from the union, enough to live on, as we all did, and he has used it, but he has not repaid any of it since he went back to work. But more than this, he has informed on the

> women who are supporting us so val
> trains whenever they have tried to use

It is this dual offence, going back to
women, that has made Diara into the
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> A long time ago [...] before any of y
> happened with in a framework, an ord
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Interestingly enough, this is not a lam
preamble to what Fa Keita sees unfol
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directly from the native narrative of h
is leaving, Saido, Diara's son, as he h
sequences of the trial:

> He was conscious that, from this day
> insulted by anyone, perhaps even beat

> women who are supporting us so valiantly, and he has forced them to get off trains whenever they have tried to use them. (91)

It is this dual offence, going back to work and turning in the strike-supporting women, that has made Diara into the defendant in this formal trial. It is during the sentencing phase of the trial that the urban sub-proletariat returns to its cultural memory to come up with the ideal punishment for Diara, and it is in this staging of the trial that a combination of two forms of knowledge – the narrative and the scientific, as explained by Lyotard – come into play. While the formalistic aspects of the trial are normalized through pedagogical principles and their application during the trial, the elements of normative cultural narrative become obvious during the sentencing phase of the trial, as explained by Fa Keita:

> A long time ago [...] before any of you were born, everything that happened happened with in a framework, an order that was our own, and the existence of that order was of great importance in our lives. Today, no such framework exists. There are no castes among people.[...] There are no weavers, no artisans in metal, no makers of fine shoes. (94)

Interestingly enough, this is not a lament for a precapitalist past; it is, in fact, a preamble to what Fa Keita sees unfolding right in front of him. This changing order, as he mentions, "is happening" (94) right before them in the shape of the trial, or the "tribunal" (94). It is the question of punishing the offender that concerns Fa Kieta, for he has no problem in emulating the procedural aspects of the trial, but it is in the sentencing that he must remind the people that "If you imitate the hirelings of your masters, you will become like them, hirelings and barbarians" (95). Thus it is crucial at this stage of the strike to recuperate the lost cultural memory to conclude the trial. Needless to say, Fa Keita speaks from a place that does not, according to Lyotard, need legitimation, for his authority to speak comes from a largely forgotten but still existent narrative of social norms. In the end, the jury leaves without passing a verdict, but an unspoken sentence has already taken its course, and this latter verdict derives directly from the native narrative of honour and shame. Thus, while everyone is leaving, Saido, Diara's son, as he helps his father up, understands the consequences of the trial:

> He was conscious that, from this day forward, his father could be reviled and insulted by anyone, perhaps even beaten, and he would have no defense. And

> he knew that wherever he himself went, people would look at him and say, 'Your father is a traitor.' (96)

Diara's fall and its attendant circumstance can only be understood in terms of the native narrative of shame, but its manifestation is inextricably connected with the sense of solidarity – which he had defied through his actions – created by the strike. Thus, it is through the trial that one perceives the merging of two forms of knowledge: the pragmatics of scientific knowledge; and narrative knowledge.

Thus, by the time we as readers reach the final climactic moment of the novel, the ground has already been laid for the strike to succeed. Even though, from the very start, we are provided in the character of Ibrahim Bakayoko with a sort of foreshadowing of the vanguardist approach to revolution, he never really plays any active role in the day-to-day affairs of the strike. Although he does possess the symbolic power to mobilize the people, the mobilization itself does not require his immediate presence but, rather, merely the inspiration of his existence. It is in the final stages of the novel, after all the sacrifices have been made, that Ibrahim Bakayoko takes centre-stage, but even at that moment his success must come from below; in the last instance, it is the base that must determine the future of the revolutionary strike. Thus, when Ibrahim Bakayoko speaks at the rally he can do so only because he is sure that the people, those affected by the strike, will rise up with him in solidarity.

Quite a lot has transpired by the time one reaches the final climactic moment of the novel: a boy has been killed by a French officer, and Penda and Samba N'Doulougou are killed during the culminating phase of the women's march. Thus, by the time Ibrahim Bakayoko gets up on the stage to talk to the people, his speech is not meant to create solidarity but, rather, to articulate the solidarity already created through the material experiences of the participants in the strike. This becomes evident at the meeting where the Imam, the governor, and another speaker address the people while excluding anyone from the train-workers' union. It is at this point that Ibrahim creates a space for his voice to be heard through the power of the people. As Ibrahim Bakayoko barges uninvited onto the stage, it is the crowd that, by insisting "let him speak, let him speak" (216), allows Ibrahim the power to express his views on behalf of the people. Ibrahim Bakayoko's entire speech derives its legitimacy from popular solidarity and is sanctioned by the people. Thus, when Ibrahim Bakayoko starts speaking, his every question and assertion is legitimated by

the people, as his speech is less of a speech and more of a conversation with those assembled. He says:

> It seems that this strike is the work of a little group of black sheep. Led by foreigners. If this is so, there must be a lot of black sheep in this country; and you, who know us all, look at me and tell me who are the foreigners. It seems also that we are incapable of creating anything by ourselves, but we must be of some use because, since we stopped working, the trains have stopped running. (217)

The speech, therefore, is a semiotic expression of material solidarity. And although Ibrahim Bakayoko is the leader, the 'enunciating subject' of these words, he can only speak because the popular solidarity constructed by the very materiality of the strike has given him this voice to speak with the people. Thus, it is no wonder that Ibrahim Bakayoko, though posited as the main character of the novel and the master-mind of the strike, is mostly absent from the narrative and is mentioned only in the third person for most of the book. One way of looking at his role is to see that his moment of possibility to speak to the people is centred in the recognition granted by the people; he is a leader because the people have accepted him as such and not because he has brought the people together through his visionary leadership. Thus, in staging the final speech of Ibrahim Bakayoko, the speech that finally challenges French hegemony, Sembène also teaches the reader that true leadership is made possible only through the collective will, a will articulated in solidarity and not tethered to the vision of a single mind or leader.

Thus, on the whole, it is safe to suggest that Sembène's novel cannot, and should not, be read just as an exercise in reading and teaching the form, an exercise that directs the reader to the inner dynamics of the diegetic world of the novel itself. The novel should be read and taught in terms of its didactic and affective value for the reader. Read with an eye on what the narrative mobilizes as its most important trope – solidarity – the novel can become a tool in teaching and shaping the need and the mode of articulation of lateral solidarities in our struggles against the current global regime of neoliberal truth.

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