

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE CURSE / Xala (1975)

Ousmane Sembène

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Senegalese Writer, producer, and director Ousmane Sembène was born on January 1, 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal. He died on June 9, 2007, in Dakar, Senegal. Sembène attended both a quranic school and a French school until age thirteen. He then worked with his father, a fisherman, before moving to Dakar in 1938, where he did a number of odd jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the corps of Senegalese *Tirailleurs* (sharpshooters) and sent to France to fight in the Free French Forces. In 1944 and 1947, Sembène was involved in union strikes, respectively, in Senegal as a railroad worker, and in France as a dock worker and member of the Communist Party. Having dropped out of school early, Sembène had to teach himself to read and write properly. He went on to write several novels, some of which he adapted into films. Sembène's only film training was one year spent at the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, at the age of forty, under Soviet director Mark Donskoy. Sembène produced nine features: *Black Girl* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1977), *Camp Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelwar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2001), *Molaadé* (2003).

*Film* Though often translated as "The Curse," the literal translation of the Wolof word *xala* is 'impotence'. *Xala*, the film, is an adaptation of Sembène's novel *Xala* (1973). *Xala* is a political satire on the state of French-speaking African states more than ten years after their much-vaunted independence. The filmmaker criticizes the shortcomings and excesses of the African elites, who not only repeat but, above all, exaggerate the very things they criticized the colonizers for doing, thereby causing a return to colonial control over Africa and keeping the continent in a state of economic, political and social inertia.

*Background* *Xala* was shot on location in Senegal, with a cast of local actors. The main language spoken in the film is Wolof, with French spoken very sporadically. Before it could be released, *Xala* was censored in Senegal by Senegalese president, poet, and philosopher, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who saw the film as an indictment of his political regime and a criticism of his much-heralded philosophy of Negritude. Two scenes from the film, where the bust of Marie-Antoinette is thrown from the Chamber of Commerce, and where the white men hand briefcases of money to the native members of the Chamber of Commerce, were also censored in France.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

**El Hadji** A polygamous Senegalese businessman and member of the Chamber of Commerce  
**Adja** El Hadji's first wife, who stays loyal to him  
**Oumi** El Hadji's second wife, who leaves him when he is ruined.  
**Rama** A feminist student, the daughter of El Hadji and Adja  
**Ngone** : El Hadji's third wife

### SYNOPSIS

It is the day of Senegal's independence. To the cheers of the crowd, a group of African leaders, dressed in traditional Senegalese garb, storm the Chamber of Commerce, oust the colonial administrators, throw the colonial symbols onto the chamber's stairs, and take up residence. The next day, the African leaders, having traded their traditional clothes for new three-piece suits, elect a new president of the Chamber of Commerce. Sometime later, the white colonial administrators, who were ousted from the Chamber of Commerce, return to see the new owners with briefcases filled with crisp banknotes, which they place in front of each of the new local leaders. The African elites are delighted by the contents of the briefcases and openly welcome the colonial administrators, one of whom becomes advisor to the president of the Chamber of Commerce. To celebrate his new position, one of the members of the Chamber of

Commerce, El Hadji Aboucader Bèye, takes a third, younger wife, buys her a villa and a car, and organizes an extravagant and expensive wedding to which he invites his colleagues. In addition to his duties at the Chamber of Commerce, El Hadji is a businessman, who, using his position, diverts the supplies of rice intended for drought victims and sells it in his stores for personal profit. Like him, his colleagues engage in embezzlement, influence peddling, and writing bad checks. Unlike his colleagues, who steal public money and cheat the system unnoticeably, El Hadji is careless, which causes his downfall. El Hadji spends a lot of money on his wedding, even takes the liberty to issue bad checks to his colleagues and the government to pay for the ceremony. Struck by *xala* (impotence) on his wedding night, El Hadji, who swears that he does not believe in traditional healing power, who refuses to speak Wolof, and who only drinks and washes his Mercedes with imported mineral water to appear "civilized," finds himself making the rounds of traditional fortunetellers and healers to regain his virility. Meanwhile, his creditors close in on him, his second wife and third wife leave him, and his colleagues in the Chamber of Commerce oust him. To cure his malady, El Hadji goes so far as to agree to be spat on by a brotherhood of beggars whom he cheated and persecuted in the past.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### EL HADJI

El Hadji is authoritarian, pretentious, chauvinistic, dishonest and comical. He is the epitome of the failed leader of post-independence Africa. His antics would be laughable if they didn't have destructive consequences for his compatriots. His sexual impotence connotes the impotence of post-colonial regimes and the inability of African elites to provide lasting solutions to the dilemmas facing their countries.

*Authoritarian* El Hadji is a man who hates being contradicted. When his daughter, Rama, tells him that she opposes his third marriage and calls men 'dogs', he slaps her and reminds her that he is the master, and that she can take her revolution elsewhere. In his desire to appear "civilized," El Hadji avoids speaking Senegal's national language, Wolof, and insists that Rama address him in French. He gets angry when she does not comply.

*Pretentious/chauvinistic* El Hadji has three wives. For each of them, he has built a villa. He has no fixed residence, but his wives' homes are his own, which he can visit whenever he likes. Thus, El Hadji has built himself a harem in which his submissive wives patiently wait for him. He comes to "satisfy" them as he pleases and give them children to raise. The relationship between El Hadji and his wives is like that of master and slave, of superior and inferior. To his colleagues, he pretentiously declares that his wives have all they need from him.

*Comical* El Hadji is a character in whom the tragic coexists with the comic. El Hadji becomes impotent on his third wedding night, and one is tempted to feel a little pity for him. However, El Hadji's contortions in his efforts to regain his virility, and his mocking expression when he believes he has regained it thanks to the care of a *marabout*, make him a burlesque character. Indeed, under his three-piece suit, El Hadji wears charm bracelets and belts. And in the evening, after smearing a mysterious concoction all over his body, he crawls like an animal on the prowl to join his third wife in bed.

*Dishonest* El Hadji's dishonesty comes from the fact that he pretended to be what he was not to gain access to the Chamber of Commerce. He is also guilty of embezzling rice from the National Food Suppliers and issuing false checks to his colleagues, the government, and his *marabout*. Furthermore, El Hadji uses tradition and modernism conveniently, when they suit his purpose, without any real attachment to either of these modes of life.

### ADJA

Adja is the traditional woman, loyal and stoic. She never raises her voice with her husband, El Hadji. She never upsets him. When El Hadji gets angry, even for unfounded reasons, she apologizes. She remains with her husband through the difficult trials that he puts her through and that he himself undergoes.

*Loyal* Adja is a woman raised in the Senegalese tradition of submission and loyalty to the husband. Despite what can be called El Hadji's disloyalty towards Adja (the fact that he brought two new women into their marriage), Adja remained faithful till the end. It is in her arms that El Hadji went to find solace when he lost his business and his position at the Chamber of Commerce, and his second and third wives deserted him. And she stood by him when the beggars forced their way into his home and humiliated him. Her tears at that moment show how much she is pained by her husband's humiliation.

*Stoic* Adja tells her daughter, Rama, that the best remedy against adversity is patience. She was patient when her husband deserted her house for the house of his second wife, Oumi, and she is still patient when El Hadji decides to marry a third wife. To Oumi, who asks her how she can stand their husband's third marriage, she advises patience and tells her that now she has to learn how to be stoic, as she has over the years.

## **OUMI**

Oumi is the filmmaker's portrait of unbridled modernism. She is materialistic, disloyal, noisy, and envious. She has an attraction to money which she seems to have passed on to her children. The filmmaker makes her almost a comical character in her physical appearance and her taste for the superfluous. Her large sunglasses, her oversized wig, and her love for her television set are laughable.

*Disloyal* Oumi is a disloyal and frivolous woman. The night of El Hadji's third wedding, Oumi also decides not to be left out. While El Hadji dances with his new wife, Oumi is courted by the president of the Chamber of Commerce, and she ends up indolently hugging his chest, making it easy to guess where her night will end. And when her husband loses all his property to his creditors, Oumi empties the house and leaves with her children, abandoning El Hadji to his fate.

*Materialistic* Oumi is focused on money and material things, and she seems to have passed on this taste for material things to her children. When her husband visits her, she empties his pockets of the money left in his wallet after her children take their own share from their father in front of their mother's bedroom door. Rather than sympathize with the misfortune of El Hadji, who has just lost his entire fortune, Oumi hastens to empty the house of what is left and flees with the children. The importance that Oumi gives to her television set is symptomatic of her attachment to the material and the superficial.

## **RAMA**

Rama, the daughter of El Hadji and Adja, is an empathetic girl. For the filmmaker, she is the voice of a changing society. She takes up the cause of the oppressed and fights for a modern Senegal, free from the weight of patriarchal traditions that keep women enslaved. However, her fight for change faces century-old obstacles that will not make her task easy.

*Transitional* Rama is the prototype of a changing Senegal (and Africa), but which is still struggling to find its true path. This places her, therefore, between two cultures, one that she wants to escape from, and the other which is still far from her reach. She opposes her father's third marriage. However, she lives under his authority and has difficulty fully initiating her revolution, which her father advises her to do elsewhere than in his house. In any case, with Rama, a new era is announced.

*Empathetic* After her disappointment with her father, Rama visits him in his office. She tells him that she is coming to see him on behalf of her mother, who is not aware of her visit. Rama tells her father that her mother is dwindling without him and needs him to visit her. When her father is afflicted with *xala*, she asks her mother if she can do anything for him. She wants to speak to him to express her support, but her mother finds it shameless to interfere in her father's intimate affairs. In the end, when El Hadji is humiliated by the beggars, it is Rama, who, alongside her mother, supports him.

## THEMES

**Political allegory** The Chamber of Commerce is a metaphor for a state government. It is a mini state. In fact, the president of the Chamber of Commerce is made in the image of Senegal's first the president, Leopold Sedar Senghor, who ruled Senegal from 1960 to 1980, and was therefore in power at the time Sembène made *Xala*. Nevertheless, Sembène's critique is not exclusively directed at Senghor's administration. It is a critique levelled at any of the post-independence African nations ridden with such flaws as corruption, inequality, nepotism, personality cult, political and economic inertia, treason and neo-colonization. Thus, the members of the Chamber of Commerce are the ministers of this allegorical state, and the antics that the filmmaker critiques in them are those of the leaders of any African nation.

**Failed leadership** The post-colonial African leader, Sembène shows very well, is an envious leader, envious of the colonizer's world. The dream of the post-colonial African leader is to be in the shoes, suits, cars, and beds of the colonizer. When the occasion presents itself for the African leader to realize this dream, he mimics the colonizer both in his appearance and in his actions to the point of the comical. In *Xala*, on Independence Day, the local elites, dressed in traditional Senegalese garb, storm the Chamber of Commerce and oust its white colonial representatives. The local elite remove the vestiges of colonization from the Chamber of Commerce and replace them with the portrait of the Chamber's new president. Dressed in well-pressed three-piece suits and outfitted with new Mercedes cars, the local elites set about to govern differently, that is, with eyes towards the well-being of the native populations who acclaimed their rise to power and now expect so much from them. However, the local elites' priorities switch the same day they take control of the Chamber of Commerce, precisely when two of the colonial administrators, whom they evicted earlier from the Chamber of Commerce, visit them, each carrying briefcases stashed with banknotes and which they place before the new leaders. From the moment the local leaders open the briefcases and look inside, their greed takes over their sense of duty, and they become, no longer the saviors of their people, but the oppressors of their people, thus confirming Frantz Fanon's assertion that "the native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the oppressor." In *Xala*, the character El Hadji, from the height of his new position, becomes an oppressor to his family and to his people.

**Religion** Sembène's critique of religion is acerbic and multifold. Religion can be a breeding ground for abuse and insincerity. El Hadji, by his name, is a holy man. In Senegal, the titles "El Hadji" (for men) and "Adja" (for women) apply to Muslims who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and who, on their return to their communities, are credited with a certain holiness, honesty and wisdom. El Hadji and his first wife, Adja, have accomplished their pilgrimage and enjoy the respect of their community. However, El Hadji falls far short of the behavior expected of him by his title. Firstly, his recourse to fetishism, *marabouts* and pagan rituals makes him not a herald of Islam but a hypocrite, who surfs on animist or Islamic beliefs when it suits him. When El Hadji wants a third wife, he invokes his loyalty to the Muslim religion, which entitles him to four wives. When he believes himself to be afflicted with *xala*, which renders him impotent, El Hadji becomes a fervent believer in animist rituals and relies on them to the point of ridicule and comic. He complies, for instance, with the injunctions of his first *marabout*, who prescribes that he wear mystical bracelets and belts, smear his whole body with a mysterious concoction, and crawl at night towards his wife, holding a talisman clenched between his teeth--rituals that do not fail to frighten the young wife. And yet, a few days earlier, El Hadji had refused to comply with his mother-in-law's advice to sit on a mortar, a pestle clenched between his thighs, to guarantee his virility towards his new wife. El Hadji found the ritual ridiculous and outdated. El Hadji's faith is perfunctory and disingenuous. It vacillates according to his interests of the moment. His title as a pious and honest Muslim enables him to do good business in his import-export firm. But recourse to ancestral rites, which he dismisses out of hand when things are going well, serves as a last resort when he finds himself in trouble. El Hadji's vacillation is the condition of the colonized, always caught between ebb and flow.

**Personality split** El Hadji is a schizophrenic, a man who hears several bells ringing in his head every day and doesn't really know which one to answer. When the colonized man in his traditional clothes comes to power, everything changes. Imbued with his new authority, El Hadji buys himself a Mercedes with the taxpayer's dime. He drinks only imported Evian water. He has his Mercedes washed only with mineral water. He refuses to lower himself to the practice of the pagan rituals recommended to him by his mother-in-law. He clears the sidewalks of beggars, whom he considers human waste and insults to the sight of

tourists. And he insists that his daughter, Rama, a student at Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University, who loves to speak Wolof (Senegal's national language), only speak to him in French. El Hadji wants to appear civilized and sophisticated and for him, it implies going beyond merely mimicking the former colonizer. At the same time, El Hadji, who dreams of substituting himself for the former colonizer whose world he is envious of, appeals to traditional, ancestral customs when he decides to take a third wife. When Rama objects to his taking a third wife, he slaps his daughter and tells her that the great men who resisted imperialism and held Senegal together were polygamous. When he loses his sexual virility, El Hadji submits to the most degrading rituals prescribed by his *marabouts*. And ultimately, he agrees, in order to regain his "manhood," to undress himself and be spat on by the brotherhood of beggars. Whereas the colonizer ruled with collectedness, precision, and efficacy to guarantee his reign, the colonized, the native elite, seeking to emulate his former colonizer, autodestructs by blatant scatteredness, imprecision, excess, and extravagance. El Hadji is the image of the neurotic, inexact, and extravagant African leader, who ends up making a mockery of independence.

**Feminism** Rama, El Hadji's daughter, is meant to embody the voice of Western-style feminism. A medical student, independent in her movements, as evidenced by the moped with which she travels around the city of Dakar, she does not keep her tongue in her pocket. In fact, she is the image of the woman who takes possession of her space and her voice. She asks her mother, El Hadji's first wife, to divorce her father rather than accept that he imposes another rival on her in a third marriage. Rama's feminism, Sembène seems to suggest, is not yet ripe for Africa. The moorings of this feminism to patriarchy are too solid for it to be able to proclaim its emancipation. Indeed, when El Hadji overhears the conversation between his daughter and his first wife about his marriage, when he hears Rama calling him a dog, El Hadji slaps her and tells her to go do her revolution somewhere other than in his home. Rama still lives under her father's roof, is financially dependent on him, and does not have the means to implement her policy of female emancipation. In contrast to Rama's Western feminism, which is struggling to take off, Rama's mother offers a feminism that could be described as 'womanism'. The mother asks the daughter to show patience and stoicism in the face of adversity. This type of feminism, where the quality of the woman is measured by her strength of resistance and adaptation, as well as her loyalty to the ideal of marriage, has already been celebrated by Senegalese authors such as Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Bâ, who judged that Western feminism was not adapted to African realities. This is what Sembène also seems to suggest by noting Rama's dependence on the father.

**Corruption** With *Xala*, Sembène criticizes the buying of conscience, the influence peddling, and other behaviors that harm good governance in post-colonial Africa. The new rulers, the members of the Chamber of Commerce, did not wait long to be corrupted. The day after the local elites took power and evicted the colonial administrators from the Chamber of Commerce, the latter returned to the Chamber with briefcases loaded with money and immediately fell into the good graces of the local rulers. From this moment on, the former colonial administrators turned into advisors to the new management team, becoming their eyes, their ears, and their brains: Thus, paradoxically, the local rulers relocated their ability to think and devise solutions to their country's problems to those from whom they wanted their independence. The corrupted African elites, by falling prey to bribery, enabled the return to power of the former colonizers. They allowed neo-colonization to have a foothold in Africa. The immorality of the local leaders did not stop at this aberration. Now, freed from the tasks of governing, which they abandoned to the neo-colonizers, they devoted themselves to issuing bad checks, to shady business dealing, to the management of their private companies supported by the embezzlement of public goods and public markets. For example, El Hadji supplied his stores with tons of rice and other goods acquired illegally from the National Food Suppliers. Other members of the Chamber of Commerce peddled their influence, pushing businessmen's bids for procurement in exchange for bribes. El Hadji's downfall came when he dared to issue bad checks to other members of the Chamber of Commerce and to the government. El Hadji was then excluded from the Chamber of Commerce. Before leaving, however, he spoke up to denounce his colleagues for hypocrisy, accusing them of being like him, corrupt sellouts, who wanted to pass for models of virtue.

**Cultures** Sembène gives us his main character as a case study for examining aspects of the cultures that are at play in Senegal. El Hadji, this Senegalese man, is a composite of several cultures, which he performs in an awkward way. In any case, he allows us to begin a discussion about these cultures. First and foremost, he is a Senegalese man who grew up in a traditional environment that shaped him socially,

religiously and politically. Socially, El Hadji's tradition has always emphasized man as the structuring element for both family and society. Religiously, El Hadji's culture is animist, a belief that sees souls and gods in the things of nature, and that often tends to grant these natural gods masculine attributes. With the Moroccan Almoravids' invasion of sub-Saharan Africa in the 12th century, El Hadji's animism was diluted by Islam, which, while changing certain aspects of the social architecture, such as matriarchy, continued to grant men superiority over women. This aspect of Islam, which already exists in traditional animist society, facilitates its retention in Senegalese society. As a result, the Senegalese willingly straddle animism and Islam, as is the case with El Hadji, who swings between the mosque and the *marabout*. Politically and economically, it was Europe which, although it failed to cover the whole of Senegal with Christianity (less than 5% of Senegalese society is Christian), molded Senegal through colonization and its capitalist regime based on the accumulation of personal wealth as the measure of success. Colonization saw fit, in order to succeed, not to disturb the traditional gendered organization of Senegal too much, but to make it one of its cornerstones. As a result, El Hadji, a blend of traditional Senegalese, Muslim and French cultures, became a poor performer of each. He assimilated them in a disjointed synthesis. One thing, however, remained constant in him, as it existed in each of the cultures he inherited: his perception of women as accessory.

**Superstition** Animism, which is based on the belief that the elements of nature have souls, and sometimes represent gods, demands a certain respect between people and their environments. When people offend these elements or nature's gods, they may pay the price by being cursed. And when a member of the community is done injustice, he or she can call upon the gods for justice. El Hadji suffers from temporary erectile dysfunction. What in Western societies could be interpreted as the result of a psychological affect (stress, overworking, exhaustion) or a pathological affect (blood pressure, nerve damage), finds, in the context of animism, a mysterious, supernatural explanation. El Hadji's affliction immediately invites all sorts of suppositions. One wonders who he angered who wants to take revenge on him. The Chamber of Commerce the president's first suspicions are directed at Oumi, El Hadji's second wife. Rama's suspicions are directed at her own mother, Adja, who swears that she would never think of doing such a thing to her husband. El Hadji himself suspects Oumi at one point and in his thoughts begs her to deliver him, swearing to divorce his third wife if it is his third marriage that has offended her. In the hope of healing from his affliction, El Hadji makes the rounds of the marabouts, who prescribe remedies, each as absurd as the next. Ngone's mother, who asks El Hadi to perform the virility ritual before his first night with the new bride, might have an excuse for the skeptics of animism. She could be accused of falling easily into the obscurantism of superstition due to her lack of formal education and the fact that she is immersed in Senegalese tradition. Yet, what Sembène seems to be telling us, by making the Senegalese elites (El Hadji, the president) and the new Senegalese generation (Rama) as superstitious as the traditional Senegalese (Ngone's mother, Modu, El Hadji's driver, the beggars and the marabouts), is that superstition has reached all strata of the Senegalese society, and that it has a bright future ahead of it. As Ngone's mother tells El Hadji, whatever his social status and education, he will never be a white man and will always be governed by traditional beliefs. This seems to be the viewpoint of Sembène himself, who, in *Xala*, demonstrates the power of animist beliefs when El Hadji's impotence comes from a spell cast on him by a beggar he has angered in the past, and when his recovery comes from the power of a *marabout* who also returns the *xala* on El Hadji with incantations when El Hadji writes him a bad check.

**Appearance** Sembène denounces the use of simulation, appearance, or false pretenses as effective strategies for social mobility. In *Xala*, individuals of questionable morality pose as virtuous persons and occupy positions of high responsibility and leadership. The members of the Chamber of Commerce, who came to power under the acclamations of the populations, are in fact people thirsty for power and money, who ruminated on their desire to be in the place of the colonizers until it became possible for them to do so. To gain support from the masses, the local members of the Chamber of Commerce operated by connivence: they dressed like the local population, in traditional garb. Like the locals, they showed outrage against colonization. When they took over the Chamber of Commerce, the local leaders removed from it all the statues, portraits, and cultural vestiges that connoted "France," and they left them on the steps of the Chamber of Commerce for the colonial administration to come and collect under the jeers of the population. All this, however, was mere gesticulation, mere pretense to appear as sympathetic to the masses' anger and to gain support from them. The next day, the local leaders, bribed by the colonial administrators, reintroduced the latter into the Chamber of Commerce and took governance advice from them. This is Sembène's explicit criticism of African leaders, who, following the independence of their countries, exhibit

a false outrage often resulting in changes in appearance (change of the name of the country, change of the color of the national flag), which under the surface, keep all the infrastructures of colonial domination. Sembène also invites the people to be self-critical, because if this manipulation is possible, it is because the people are gullible and too often allow themselves to be seduced by high-sounding titles and pageantry. Sembène shows that the phenomenon by which immoral people are promoted to posts of leadership will continue as long as the masses allow themselves to be seduced by the superficial, the shiny, and the flashy. Thus, the pickpocket, who robbed a peasant in Dakar had an impressive three-piece made for him from the money of his crime, and, dressed like a winner, manages to seduce the members of the Chamber of Commerce, who choose him as El Hadji's replacement. Sembène leaves it to his audience to imagine the disgrace that such a man is capable of causing to the Chamber of Commerce, especially when that body is a metaphor for the State.

**Change/transience** With *Xala*, Sembène signals the change in Senegalese society. He does this through the women who surround El Hadji. His first wife, Adja, is the symbol of a traditional Senegalese society destabilized by the brutal arrival of modernism. Adja is the traditional pious, enduring woman who advises her daughter Rama that patience is the mother of virtues and the antidote to adversity. This adversity comes to Adja in the form of her rival Oumi, El Hadji's second wife. The arrival of Oumi, who is younger than Adja, is the signal for her that her time is over. El Hadji moves out of the family home and settles more permanently in the house he bought for Oumi, only paying sporadic visits to Adja. Unlike Adja's reserved tone, Oumi's behavior is outrageous. She is noisy and talkative, insults her husband, snatches his wallet and helps herself to money. Furthermore, when El Hadji visits Oumi, the eldest of the three children he has with her stops him at the door of his mother's bedroom and extorts El Hadji, as if he had to pay a passage fee to see Oumi. El Hadji's second wife, in her exaggeratedly high wig, enormous sunglasses, and Western clothing, symbolizes a modernism focused on money; the opposite of traditional Adja. As for Rama, the daughter of El Hadji and Adja, who insists that her mother resolve her father's humiliation through divorce, her role is that of the feminist who challenges the authority of the patriarchy, whom she calls a dog. Rama, however, does not have the means to carry out her revolution and remains under the influence of El Hadji, on whom she depends financially. No matter, Rama dared to set the tone; she dared to say to her father's face what she thinks of him, that "men are all dogs. Nothing will ever be the same again, Sembène seems to tell us. Besides, El Hadji's dream of a third wife will never materialize. Ngone leaves him. The reign of the patriarchy is in decline with a wild modernism (represented by Oumi) which has decided, by stripping patriarchy, to humiliate him too: the night of El Hadji's third wedding, Oumi ends up in the arms of the president of the Chamber of Commerce. And when El Hadji loses everything to his creditors, Oumi leaves him with her children and everything she can take from her house, insisting that they be careful not to damage her television. Society is in the midst of change, Sembène shows us, but when things get tough, tradition can still be a source of comfort. It is, in fact, with Adja, the unconditionally loyal wife, that El Hadji will find comfort when he has lost everything. This, however, is not Sembène's total emotional investment in tradition, for to support El Hadji in his moment of crisis, Adja is standing by him, and so is Rama, too, his feminist daughter.

**Conflict of generations** The conflict between El Hadji and his daughter, Rama, as well as the misunderstanding between Rama and her mother, Adja, is a generational one. El Hadji and Adja come from this generation of traditional Senegalese whose institutional balance is based on the separation of the sexes and the conviction of the weakness and inferiority of the female sex in relation to the male sex. Ngone's mother, a woman of the same generation as Adja, expresses this well when, on the night of her daughter's nuptials, she reminds her that her husband is her master, that she must always be available to him, and above all, that she must never raise her voice when speaking with him. Adja has always practiced this precept, waiting patiently for her husband, El Hadji, to come and see her according to his schedule; she is careful not to ask him about his intimate life, and she never ventures to upset him. This is why Adja doesn't understand the audacity of her daughter, Rama, who irritates El Hadji with her outspoken positions and daring, shameless conversations. Indeed, Rama, a feminist student, makes a harsh judgment of her father's polygamous practices: she finds them degrading for women and asks her mother to get out of them by filing for divorce from her father. Rama calls all polygamous men, her father included, dogs and liars; and she says it to El Hadji's face. El Hadji slaps his daughter and reminds her that she is still living in his house. Here, the clash of generations is not subtle. It is a war without mercy, a battle without gloves, which the past—through El Hadji's generation—wages on the future—represented by Rama's generation. This war

is explicit and violent. It is by means of insults and physical blows that the old and new generations jostle for positioning. However, the tide seem to be turning against the old generation, either because that generation is working against itself (El Hadji belittling tradition and seeking to pass for a modern French man) or because time is running out on that generation (El Hadji being too weak and frail for his new bride, Ngone, who ends up leaving him). El Hadji's sexual impotence is the symbol of the emasculation of the past, a past that has drawn its glory only from the prominence and good health of the father's genitals taken as the organizing structure of society.

**Patriarchy** When Rama opposes her father's third marriage and, therefore, places him in the category of dogs and liars, he punishes her with a slap, stressing to her that his household is governed by his rule, the rule of the law of the father, and he suggests that she leave his house if she does not approve of that law. He also suggests that it is highly improbable that she can escape that law. Indeed, he tells her that the heroes of this country are men like himself, that is, proudly polygamous. Family being the archetypical foundation of patriarchy, it is by consolidating the fortress of his family that El Hadji hopes to promote his power and project himself in the larger Senegalese society. Consolidating his fortress means, for El Hadji, having several wives and a multitude of children. Yet, patriarchy, Sembène seems to suggest, is in decline. Sembène demonstrates this by attacking patriarchy's primary institution (the family) and patriarchy's preferred tool of governance (male erection). Patriarchy's erection falls on the very day he increases his harem. Patriarchy's loss of power had already been foreshadowed by seemingly innocuous events, but which, nonetheless, sounded the alarm bells of an imminent downfall: Rama's revolt, Oumi's insolence, the extortion by Oumi's children. Patriarchy is no longer taken seriously. It is turned on its head until it loses its essential pillars. And when patriarchy tries to regain his footing, he is ridiculed by *marabouts* and illusion sellers; this fills him with more resentment and frustration, which he pours onto the most vulnerable—his daughter Rama, the beggars and the handicapped. It is at the end of the film, when those who have been his stepping-stone in his social ascent (Oumi, Ngone, Ngone's mother, but also the beggars and the handicapped) take their revenge on patriarchy that Sembène signals the end of patriarchy. Is this not an overly optimistic filmic gesture in a Senegal that is still a long way from burying the law of the father?

**Greed/lust** The white administrators who offer briefcases of money to the black leaders the day after their ouster from the Chamber of Commerce are not philanthropists. They intend to recapture this money a hundredfold. Agents of France, their intention is to preserve the economic interests of France, a country that, for a century and a half (from 1800 to 1960), was greedily attached to French-speaking Africa as its cash cow, sucking from it as many agricultural, geological, and human resources as the continent was capable of producing. The extraordinary gluttony of France inspired those to whom France represented itself in superlative terms, and who only dreamed of emulating France. When the independence of Africa came, and this emulation passed from the register of a mere dream to that of reality, crooked Africans emerged, like El Hadji and his colleagues from the Chamber of Commerce. For them, it was a matter of accumulating, by any means necessary, personal wealth. Thus, El Hadji and his peers set about lying, cheating, stealing, twisting the arm of legality to enrich themselves. And the more they enriched themselves illegally, the more they were intoxicated, and the more they wanted. With material gluttony came sexual gluttony, for an eminently wealthy man apparently cannot help but control others. And the number of women he has is the measure of the mastery of the rudder by the Senegalese man. El Hadji offered himself one, then two, then three wives, as one offers oneself some properties. And between the women, he offered himself a multitude of children, too, as one buys oneself assets. To his second wife, Oumi, as well as to Oumi's children, El Hadji passed on the "scent of the father," the father's illness, his greed. They, too, became greedy for money. Adja, the first wife, and her children escaped this affliction. There must be survivors in every epidemic. Adja and her children are the parable of the survivors of this evil, the greed for material things and sexual yearning, which is eating away at the Senegalese society.

## QUESTIONS

1. The white counselor of the president of the Chamber of Commerce is never heard. He does not utter a single word throughout the film, but his presence is real. What is the filmmaker trying to tell us with this character?
2. How do you interpret Oumi's insistence on the day she leaves El Hadji that the movers not damage her television set?



3. Is Rama's mode of transportation (a moped) supposed to connote something? What exactly?
4. What do you make of Rama standing with her mother in support of El Hadji when the latter has lost everything?
5. Why is the image of El Hadji's third wife so fleeting in the film? What is she made to symbolize?
6. What various interpretations can you make of El Hadji's *xala*.

## SCENES

**Independence Day** It is Independence Day in Senegal. The people are celebrating with songs and dances. The elites of the country rush to expel the colonial rulers and take over the political and administrative institutions. The new leaders of the country proclaim themselves socialists. They insist that their socialism is based on traditional African values.



**Hurray to the new leaders!** The local leaders arrive at the Chamber of Commerce dressed in three-piece suits with bow ties. A new president of the Chamber of Commerce is chosen among the local elites. He has come to the conference room of the Chamber of Commerce with a large portrait of himself, which he places on the wall. He is applauded by his peers.



**Goodbye France!** A group of African businessmen is particularly interested in the Chamber of Commerce. They besiege the Chamber of Commerce, expel the white administrators, throw away the bust of Marie-Antoinette (the last queen of France) and other vestiges of colonial France, and occupy the posts.



**The bribe** The colonial administrators, who were expelled from the Chamber of Commerce on Independence Day, return to the Chamber of Commerce carrying briefcases. They enter the conference room and place a briefcase in front of each of the local leaders. One by one the local leaders open the briefcases in front of them and take a peek into them. They smile and nod with approval. Standing over the local leaders, the colonial administrators look at them with grins of satisfaction. The local leaders have accepted their "gift" of money.



**Solidarity in evil** The president of the Chamber of Commerce takes the floor to greet the memorable occasion that brought them to power. He presses on his collaborators and the ministers present the necessity to remain unified, for their common enemies out there have not given up and will seek every occasion to drive a wedge between them.



**The president's new counselor** One of the former white administrators of the Chamber of Commerce has now become the faithful righthand man and counselor of the president. He stands behind him at all time, pulls his chairs for him, and whispers in the president's ears.



**Wedding** The president of the Chamber of Commerce announces that to celebrate this unique occasion they have all been invited by one of the members of the Chamber of Commerce to his wedding as he is taking a third wife. He quips that, after all, modernity must not make them lose their Africanity. His peers applaud enthusiastically.

**The invitation** El Hadji takes the floor to confirm the invitation. He tells his colleagues that he married a third wife out of duty. He wants them all to honor him with their presence. He assures them that nothing will be missing at the celebration. There will be plenty of food and drink. El Hadji's colleagues applaud his speech with fervor. The president adjourns the meeting.



**Showiness** A motorcade of brand-new Mercedes Benz take the president and his collaborators home and then to El Hadji's wedding reception. El Hadji's future mother-in-law shows her guests her daughter's dowry. El Hadji bought his future wife a television set, gold, and a new car. The bride is on her way to the wedding, in a long procession of cars, beeping horns, and ululations. A flatbed tow truck carries the bride's new car.



**Rama's protest** At El Hadji's home, his wife, Adja, his daughter, Rama, and his son are having a conversation in the family room. Rama tells her mother to reject her father's third marriage and to get a divorce instead. Rama's mother tells her that she does not approve of her husband's third marriage, just as she did not his second marriage. However, at her age, she has no other alternative but being someone else's third or fourth wife.



**Adja's advice** Rama tells her mother that she has no need for another man, and that the house in which she lives is hers since her father has practically nothing in the house and spends most of his time with his second wife. The mother tells her daughter that she is grateful to El Hadji for the house. She advises her daughter to remain stoic in the face of adversity.



**El Hadji overhears his daughter** Rama tells her mother that she is too tolerant, and that she would never agree to share her husband with another woman. El Hadji walks in on the conversation and hears Rama's words. El Hadji turns to her and asks her if she has been running her foul mouth again. Then he asks his wife to get ready to come with him to the wedding. She tells him that she has been waiting for him, and he goes into his bedroom to change clothes.



**Men are dogs** Rama asks her mother not to humiliate herself by going to the wedding. Her mother replies that people will talk if she does not show. Rama says that men are all dogs. Her father overhears her remarks and comes out to the living room to confront her. Rama stands up and defiantly tells Hadji that every polygamous man is a liar.



**El Hadji slaps Rama** El Hadji slaps his daughter. She falls to the floor. He reminds her that he is the master of his household. He tells her to do her revolution elsewhere if she resents his authority. He tells her that it is people like him who booted the colonizers out and freed the country. Adja tries to calm her husband down. Rama's brother looks at his father with resentment. El Hadji leaves. Rama's brother lifts his sister from the floor.



**I am the first wife** On the way to the wedding, El Hadji stops at his second wife's (Oumi's) house to pick her up. He asks Adja to go upstairs with him to greet Oumi, but Adja refuses to get out of the car. She proudly tells him that she is his first wife and needs not bow to Oumi. El Hadji goes inside Oumi's home alone.



**Paying an entrance fee** El Hadji's three children by Oumi greet their father and tell him that their mother is in her bedroom getting ready. El Hadji is about to enter Oumi's bedroom when Oumi's oldest son stops him at the door and asks him for some money. He gives it to him and hands some money to his middle child, too. Then he enters Oumi's bedroom





**Oumi is jealous** Oumi wants to know who is waiting in the car. El Hadji tells her that it is Adja. Oumi tells her daughter, Mariam, to go tell Adja to come inside, and that she is in the shower and might take a while to be ready. Oumi then turns to her husband complaining that she knows that Adja persuaded him to get a third and younger wife just so she (Oumi) is no longer his preferred wife. She tells him that his third wife is not different from his first two wives, and that her “split” (meaning her vagina) is not horizontal but vertical like all the other splits.



**Oumi empties El Hadji's wallet** Mariam comes back to tell her mother that Adja will not come inside. Oumi replies that she can stay in the car if that is what she wants. She tells El Hadji that since he is in the spending mood, she, too, needs some money. El Hadji takes out his wallet and gives her a few banknotes. Oumi snatches the wallet, helps herself, and gives El Hadji his wallet back. Then, she pushes him out of her bedroom.



**Oumi provokes Adja** In the car, El Hadji sits between his two wives. Oumi puts her arm on El Hadji's shoulder to show Adja that she is the preferred one. Adja looks ahead, inexpressive, ignoring Oumi's provocation.



**Reception at El Hadji's** El Hadji's guests have arrived and are enjoying drinks and appetizers in the compound. The president of the Chamber of Commerce and El Hadji's colleagues, too, are there. The president's white counselor follows him everywhere.



**Influence peddling** At El Hadji's wedding reception, the elites of the Chamber of Commerce use their privileged positions to do personal business. One of El Hadji's colleagues offers to promote one of the guest's bid dossiers in exchange for some money.



**Disdain for the poor** El Hadji arrives at the wedding venue. There is a crowd of beggars waiting for him. He throws them coins, which they scurry to pick up from the ground. A soldier intimidates the beggars and gets his hand on a few coins, too.



**Confined** El Hadji, Adja, and Oumi greet the future mother-in-law. She tells Adja and Oumi of her joy to see her daughter join them as El Hadji's wife. She asks Adja and Oumi to consider her daughter as their little sister and treat her as such. Oumi tells her to not worry, and that she will treat El Hadji's third wife as well as she was treated by Adja. The two co-wives are confined in a room. El Hadji joins his guests.





**Be patient!** Oumi asks Adja what they are doing at El Hadji's wedding and what Adja thinks of the whole situation. Adja advises her to be patient just as she was patient when El Hadji took her as his second wife. Oumi tells Adja that she cannot have that kind of patience.



**I do not believe in this** El Hadji's future mother-in-law calls him over to perform a ritual to protect his virility. She asks him to undress and sit on a mortar, with a pestle between his legs. El Hadji protests that he does not believe in these superstitions and reminds his future mother-in-law that he has proven his virility with his two wives. She replies that her daughter is still young, and that she does not want any bad omen befalling her. El Hadji is infuriated, and as he leaves the room, his future mother-in-law reminds him that he is not a white man and must believe in tradition.



**The bride has arrived** The bride's motorcade arrives at the wedding venue. Her brand-new gift car, which has been paraded in the town for everyone to see, closes the spectacle. The bride is led towards El Hadji, who goes to meet her accompanied by the ululations of the women.



**El Hadji dances with his new bride** El Hadji dances with his new wife to the applause and cheers of the guests. Isolated in the mother-in-law's living room, Adja and Oumi can hear the acclamations of the crowd. The guests join in the dance. Adja is indifferent. Oumi is fulminating.



**The president flirts with Oumi** The president of the Chamber of Commerce enters the room where Oumi is standing. He greets her. She responds enthusiastically. He tells her that it is a pity that a beautiful woman like her is left with no company. He starts dancing with her all the way to the dance floor where El Hadji and his new bride are dancing.





**A Mercedes for these lips** On her way home, Adja casts an indifferent glance at the new bride's new car. In the wedding compound, the guests are indulging in food, drinks, and expensive cigars and flirting with the young female guests. One of El Hadji's colleagues promises a Mercedes to a young girl whose lips he finds sensual. On the side, a guest, who has just returned from a vacation in Switzerland, complains that he cannot enjoy Spain anymore because there are too many blacks there.





**Some stimulants for El Hadji** El Hadji's colleagues have brought him some sexual energizers. They all swear that their products are the best. They want El Hadji to try them on his first night with his bride and report to them how good they are. El Hadji tells them that he does not need any sexual stimulant. Nevertheless, he promises to try them to please them.



**El Hadji brags** The president advises El Hadji to be gentle and not forget that his third wife is a mere virgin. El Hadji tells them that he does not need their advice, that he has experience, for his first two wives were virgins, and he managed well.



**Some maternal advice for Ngone** The new bride, Ngone, is led to her husband's bedroom by her mother. The mother asks El Hadji to get himself ready. El Hadji steps into the bathroom. The mother undresses her daughter and advises her on her duties as a wife: to always be available to her husband, to never raise her voice, to be worthy of her husband, and above all to understand that men and women are not equal, and that her husband is her master. The mother lays her naked daughter in the bed and knocks on the bathroom's door, telling El Hadji, "We are ready now."



**Checking the sheets** In the wee hours, Ngone's mother and another woman knock on El Hadji's bedroom door. They are carrying a live chicken. They see El Hadji sitting in the bed, silent and sad, his head in his hands. They see Ngone lying in bed. They push her over to check the bedsheet and look at each other in disbelief.



**Nothing happened** Without saying a word, the two women quickly place the chicken on the bedsheet and set out to slaughter it. Ngone stops them, saying, it is no use, for she is still a virgin, and that nothing happened.



**I could not do it** The bride's mother turns to El Hadji, asking for some explanations. El Hadji tells her that he could not do it. She asks if it is because he could not have an erection. She tells him to get up and do something, and that he cannot sit, like crumpled paper, before her pure daughter. El Hadji gets up, his shoulders sagging, and gets out of the bedroom, leaving the two women there to comment on his impotence.



**A beaten man** The next day, El Hadji comes out of his home, dressed up for work, but looking like a beaten man, his shoulders bent, his head lowered, his steps uncertain. As he crosses the compound, where the reception tables and chair have yet to be removed, El Hadji imagines his guests laughing at him on his passage. Outside his villa, El Hadji casts a long look over his new bride's brand-new car still sitting on the flatbed of the tow truck.

**He travels on foot** El Hadji does not ride in his Mercedes. He walks along the road, closely followed by his chauffeur driving his Mercedes. In his head, he hears the reproaches of his mother-in-law, scolding him for having failed to perform the virility ritual on the wedding day. El Hadji's chauffeur drives past him and open the car door for him. El Hadji stops in a daze, as if he does not recognize him. Then, he steps into the car, and they drive away.

**Unhealthy environment** El Hadji is the owner of an import-export business. His employee opens the doors of the store. The place is infested with flies and mosquitoes. As she sprays some insecticide to get rid of the bugs, she sees two women throwing their dirty water in the streets. She complains and returns to her typewriter.





**El Hadji summons the president** El Hadji's employee congratulates him for his wedding and the great feast that followed. El Hadji asks his employee to call the president of the Chamber of Commerce and tell him to meet him immediately in his office.

**El Hadji confides in the president** The president arrives at El Hadji's office with his white counselor, Dupont-Durant. The president asks his counselor to wait for him while he talks with El Hadji. El Hadji tells the president that he could not have an erection to perform with his new wife.

**El Hadji has *xala*** El Hadji tells the president that his mother-in-law told him this morning that he has *xala*. The president is shocked by the news and asks El Hadji who he thinks gave him *xala*.



**Human nuisance** El Hadji does not answer the president's question. He hears someone singing and playing the *kora* outside. He gets out of his office and peers through the window. He sees a crowd of beggars assembled across the street. He returns to his office and complains to the president that they must get rid of this human nuisance, meaning the beggars. He tells the president that this spectacle is not a good image for independence.



**Getting rid of the beggars** The president immediately gets on the phone and calls for soldiers to come rid the street of the beggars, whom he, too, says are not good for tourism. Some soldiers, under the command of one of the white colonial administrators that were expelled from the Chamber of Commerce, come and pick up the beggars and anyone else they suspected of being up to nothing good.



**The president suspects Oumi** The two friends return to the matter at hand. The president asks El Hadji which one of his first two wives he suspects of giving him *xala*. El Hadji replies that it cannot be any of them, and that they have no reason to harm him, as they have all they want from him. El Hadji asks the president to help him.



**The president has a good marabout** The president tells El Hadji that because of their long friendship, he will recommend him his personal *marabout* (a maker of wonders). He warns El Hadji, however, that his *marabout's* services are extremely costly. El Hadji replies that he is ready to pay any price to become a man again.





**Rama heard about her father's *xala*** Adja is having a conversation with her daughter, Rama. The girl wants to know how her father's wedding went. Her mother tells her that there were a lot of guests, and that her father spent a lot of money. Rama tells her mother that she heard rumors about her father having *xala*, and she wants to know if her mother cast a spell on her father. Adja tells her daughter that she would never do such a thing.

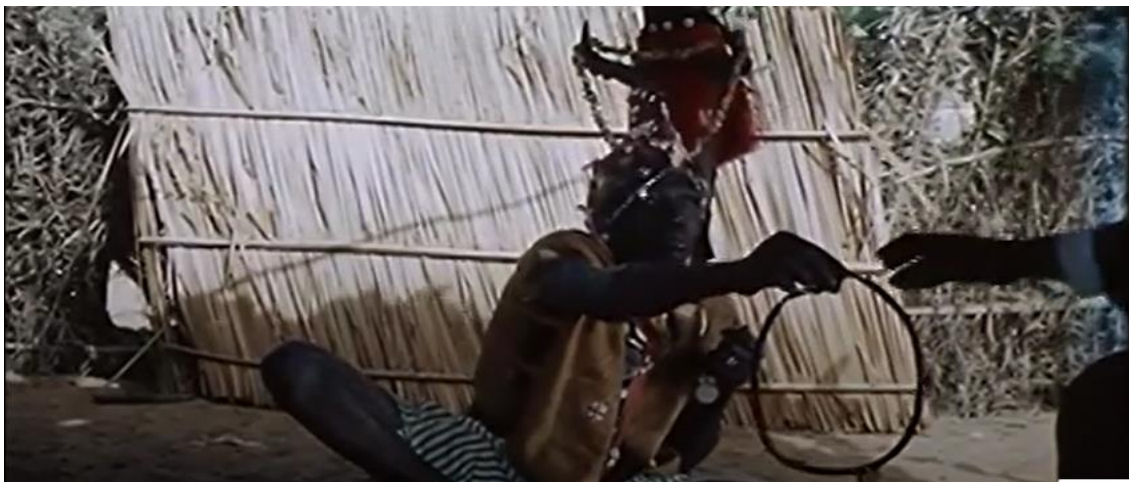
**A shameless girl** Rama asks her mother to speak to her father to reassure him. Adja tells her daughter that she will not know how to start such a conversation. Rama says that in this case, she will talk to her father. Her mother is surprised that she would be so shameless as to talk to her father about his impotence. She tells Rama that she has never encountered such a shameless girl.



**El Hadji sees a marabout** El Hadji meets the president's *marabout*. He asks him to make him a man again, and in return he will make the *marabout* a rich man. The president vouches for El Hadji, telling the *marabout* that El Hadji is a man of honor.



**The marabout's prescription** The *marabout* gives El Hadji a bottle of potion to rub on his body and especially on his genitals every morning, a bracelet to wear around his upper arm, a belt to wear around his waist, and a talisman to hold between his teeth and crawl to his wife each time he desires her.





**El Hadji frightens Ngone** El Hadji's rituals scare his bride, who is startled and screams every time he crawls towards her at night. Ngone's mother complains to her friends that she has given El Hadji a pure girl, who would excite any man, and El Hadji has so far not been able to perform in bed as a man should.



**El Hadji suspects Oumi** Oumi has come to see El Hadji for her monthly allowance. He gives her some money, and she complains that it is not enough. He gives her more. El Hadji is lost in his thoughts while Oumi is talking to him. He suspects Oumi of giving him the *xala*. In his thoughts, he promises to Oumi that he will give her whatever she wants and divorce his third wife if she restores his manhood. Oumi claps in front of his face to get his attention, and she asks him to come down to earth.

**Oumi pressures El Hadji** Oumi tells her husband that he has lost a lot of weight, and that he had better see a doctor. She tells him that whatever the case, tonight is her turn to be with him, and that he had better come ready for she is always ready.



**The beggars are back** The beggars and the crippled, whom the soldiers have dumped outside the city limits, are making their way back to the city. They gather on the outskirts of the city for a breakfast of hot milk and bread.



**The farmer's story** The farmer who was robbed during the gathering is among the beggars. He, too, was picked up by the soldiers. He tells the beggars his story. He tells them that he was entrusted with the hard-earned money of the people in his village after years of drought to go to town and buy some food for their village. Now that he is robbed, he cannot face them.

**Hope keeps people alive** The beggars advise the farmer to go back and explain his misfortune, and that he must not make the farmers, who are expecting his return, wait in vain. He replies that returning empty-handed will kill the farmers, whereas letting them hope for his return will keep them alive. Hope, he insists, keeps people alive.



**Modu has a *marabout*** El Hadji confides in his chauffeur, Modu, about his situation. Modu proposes another *marabout*, from his village, who, he ensures his boss, is efficient. El Hadji tells Modu that he has lost faith in *marabouts* but will give Modu's man a chance. So, El Hadji and Modu head to his chauffeur's village.



**El Hadji is a man again** El Hadji's car has a flat tire. El Hadji and Modu are rescued by a farmer riding a donkey cart. In the village, El Hadji lies undressed and simply covered with a blanket, in the lap of the *marabout*. The *marabout* does a few incantations. El Hadji calls Modu with excitement, telling him that he can feel himself becoming a man again. The *marabout* gives El Hadji several charms to wear around his arms and waist.



**El Hadji regains his pride** Modu drives El Hadji, all smiles and relaxing in the back seat, back to Dakar. El Hadji kisses the ribbon around his new bride's car. He pushes open the gate of his villa and steps in proudly, with his head high. He greets his mother-in-law and his wife with enthusiasm.





**The *marabout's* warning** El Hadji emerges from the *marabout's* dressing room visibly satisfied. He writes a check to the *marabout* to take to Dakar and be paid. The *marabout* accepts the check and warns El Hadji that what one hand did, another hand can undo, meaning, his check must be good or he will return his *xala* to him.



**Oumi is not available** El Hadji tells his mother-in-law that he is a man again. She praises God for answering her prayer, but she tells him that his wife is unavailable today. Ngone tells her husband that she has her period. El Hadji is not pleased. He walks out of the compound. El Hadji goes to see Oumi, his second wife. She is delighted to see him.



**I only drink imported water** Rama gets out of classes at the university and goes to visit her father. El Hadji is pleased to see his daughter. El Hadji offers Rama a glass of Evian water. Rama tells her father that she does not drink imported water. El Hadji tells his daughter that Evian is the best drink, and that he consumes at least two liters of it every day.



**Speak to me in French** Rama tells her father that her mother is psychologically suffering from his absence. He promises to go see her. Then El Hadji gets suddenly irritated and asks Rama why she insists on replying to him in Wolof (Senegal's national language) when he speaks to her in French. Rama picks up her books and exits her father's office.



**Complaints against El Hadji** The president of the Chamber of Commerce is receiving complaints from El Hadji's creditors, some of whom are his colleagues and members of the government. El Hadji has written them several checks that are being rejected by his bank for insufficient funds. Unaware that he is going bankrupt, El Hadji continues to have his car washed with bottled Evian water.



**The president summons El Hadji** El Hadji is in need of money. He asks one of his clients to lend him some money, but the client refuses. While they are talking, a soldier comes in with an envelope for El Hadji. It contains a summons for him to appear before the president.



**Accused of writing bad checks** El Hadji arrives furious at the president's office. He wants to know the cause of this summons. The president asks him about his *xala*. El Hadji replies that it is over. The president congratulates him. Then The president tells El Hadji that his colleagues have come complaining to him for returned checks. The president informs El Hadji that there is a special meeting set up to discuss his case, but he advises him to go see his bank director before the meeting. The president promises to inform the bank director of El Hadji's visit.

**El Hadji is refused a loan** El Hadji asks the bank director for a 500 000 CFA (\$1000) overdraft. The bank director pulls El Hadji's dossier from his drawer. He asks El Hadji what he did with the 100 tons of rice he collected from the National Food Suppliers. He asks El Hadji what he did with the money. El Hadji keeps insisting that he needs more money for new projects. The bank director tells El Hadji that he has been living beyond his means. The bank director asks El Hadji to give him time to consult his own supervisor about El Hadji's request. El Hadji leaves, hopeful.



**A meeting to discuss El Hadji** El Hadji goes to the Chamber of Commerce for the scheduled meeting with his colleagues. They are already seated and waiting for him. He greets them, but no one replies. The president announces that there is only one item on the agenda, the El Hadji affair.



**El Hadji's defense** El Hadji's colleagues take the floor and accuse him of running down the reputation of the Chamber of Commerce and bringing discredit to them. El Hadji takes the floor for his own defense. He chastises his colleagues for being hypocrites. He tells them that he has done nothing they do not do. He tells them that they all, he included, are petty profiteers, who fight to get their hands on whatever crumbs is left to them from the powers above. His colleagues protest against his insults.





**Purest French tradition** El Hadji suddenly switches from French to Wolof. One of his colleagues takes offense and asks him to speak in French, reminding El Hadji that the official language is French. He labels El Hadji a racist, a sectarian, and a reactionary. The president calls for order and “civilization.” He asks El Hadji to carry on but in French. He tells him that even the insults must be uttered in the purest tradition of “Francophonie.”



**We are all corrupt** El Hadji carries on. He tells his colleagues that each one of them is dirtier than him. He tells them that they are all crabs in the same basket. He tells them that in the past, they, too, have written bad checks, illegally traded rice, diverted aid for the needy, and corrupted soldiers. El Hadji accuses his colleagues of trampling democracy, justice, and equity. His colleagues protest.





**Expelled from the Chamber of Commerce** El Hadji finishes his speech and sits down. The president asks his colleagues to cast their ballots on El Hadji's fate. Unanimously, El Hadji's colleagues vote him out of the Chamber of Commerce. They applaud the vote.

**El Hadji's replacement** El Hadji is escorted out. The pickpocket who robbed the farmer is introduced to the Chamber as his replacement.



**Oumi leaves El Hadji** Oumi empties her house, gathers her children and says that she is leaving El Hadji. She insists that the movers pay particular attention to her television set.



**El Hadji's properties are seized** A bailiff arrives at El Hadji's store with some soldiers to seize El Hadji's property. El Hadji is given a stool to sit on while he is being stripped of his possessions. El Hadji's Mercedes is repossessed. The bailiff asks the soldier if any of them can drive a Mercedes. None can. The car is pushed away by the soldiers with the bailiff in the driver's seat.



**El Hadji's xala returns** El Hadji's *marabout* also comes to confront him. The check El Hadji gave him was not accepted by the bank. He returns the check to El Hadji and reminds him that what one hand did another hand can undo. The *marabout* sits down and starts some incantations. Modu tells his boss that the *marabout* has just returned his *xala*. El Hadji collapses with a groan.

**I can cure his xala** Modu explains his boss's situation to the leader of the beggars, a blind man who walks around with the help of his son. The head beggar tells Modu that he can cure El Hadji's *xala* at no cost. He tells Modu to come and see him whenever El Hadji is ready. Modu leads his boss away with his only possession, the stool on which he was sitting.

**Ngone wants El Hadji no more** Ngone's mother has someone return to El Hadji the gift he bought her daughter. She wants El Hadji to know that her daughter is no longer his wife, and that her family want nothing to do with him.



**Beggars at El Hadji's home** At dawn, the beggars converge towards El Hadji's place. They enter El Hadji's home. They make themselves comfortable in his living room. They help themselves with food from his pantry and fridge.





**The beggars want to spit on El Hadji**

El Hadji emerges from his bedroom and accuses them of robbery. The head beggar replies that this is no robbery but an act of vengeance. El Hadji asks vengeance for what. He tells El Hadji that long ago, he falsified some papers to dispossess his family and to land him in jail. He became a beggar because of what El Hadji did to him. He tells El Hadji that it is he who put the curse of *xala* on him. He tells El Hadji that if he wants to recover his manhood, he has to undress, stand before the beggars, and be spat on by all of them.



**El Hadji hesitates.** The farmer who was robbed tells him that he has lost his dignity and honor. That he must at least save his virility and become a man for his family. A soldier hears the commotion and comes asking what is going on. Rama tells him that all is fine, and that her father is only entertaining some guests.



**Adja protects her husband** El Hadji's first wife, Adja, tells the beggars to leave without spitting or she will call the soldier back. The head beggar tells El Hadji that the ball is in his court. Either he undresses, is spat on and regains his manhood or he refuses and lives with his *xa/la*. El Hadji looks at his wife pathetically.



**The ultimate humiliation** El Hadji comes forward and removes his shirt. The beggars start laughing at him. His wife cries. The beggars cover El Hadji's body with spit.

