

## Religious Manifestations in the Writings of Sembène Ousmane

Sikiru Adeyemi OGUNDOKUN

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities College of Humanities and Culture, Ikire,  
Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

\*Corresponding Author: Sikiru Adeyemi OGUNDOKUN

Email: [akorede4sure@gmail.com](mailto:akorede4sure@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract:** An essential ingredient is missing in “*Art for Art’s sake*”. That vacuum or leakage is the functionality of the art. Art cannot solely be for its own purpose because it is a social creation. A given human society gives birth to its creation and production to reflect on human living conditions, actions, inactions and experiences among other things. For Africa and its people functional art is the ultimate. An art which does not only inject its aesthetic values but also teaches moral, transmits cultural values, improves vocabulary pool and heals broken hearts with a view to developing human society is the kind of creativity/art favorable to African sphere and we think the entire world in this century, where cultural matters generate serious hot debates. In this study, we attempt to validate that African literature contains archetypal motif of traitor- ship during the colonial period and after it. To illustrate our position and demonstrate that there is connection between literature and society; our platform is the writings of Sembène Ousmane. Our interest is in Religions Manifestations in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, *Le Mandat*, and *Guelwaar*. Rooted on Sociological Criticism as its theoretical framework, the paper concludes that African literature is a panacea to developments of human consciousness and consequent societal advancement.

**Keywords:** Art, culture, literature, religion, society, development

---

### INTRODUCTION

Apart from the family, school and mass media, religion is another major agent of socialization. It is a way of showcasing people’s way of life through worship. Religion is an integral aspect of culture since it has to do with a people’s mode of life. Every act of worship is a rite and ritualistic in nature. Hence, religious matters are archetypal subjects not only in African literature but also in other arts around the world. It is hard to see a human society develop or succeed without art. Artists are the nurses and, or medical doctors, who help in providing cures to the societal maladies from time to time. By injecting fresh ideas whether consciously or unconsciously to the affairs of their society, artists shape or reshape agenda for national development.

Ideologically, Sembène Ousmane in his creative writings, is dissatisfied with the Islamic culture particularly polygamy and fanaticism. He equally frowns at using religion to direct or control people’s mind to achieve dubious personal political ambitions, which are laced with exploitative tendencies. The choice of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), *Le Mandat* (1966), and *Guelwaar* (1996) is guided by the fact that the novels represent different cardinal periods in the political evolution of the environment, which produces them.

Fictional entities are “principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy

tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction” [1]. He holds that philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics. “A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists”, From Rockwell argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

The practice of making fun of a human action with a decision to correcting the character excessiveness or weakness is known as satire. “Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior” [3]. Hence, satire is an attack on folly or vice demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behavior. From listeners, viewers and, or readers, satire is used to achieve a reaction of contempt. Creative art or simply creativity is any man-made successful effort in production or fabrication of things whether visible or invisible; tangible or intangible for the purpose of human usage, enjoyment and development. . Our adoption of the sociological approach is informed by the fact that whether verbal or

---

non-verbal, literature is socially constructed or established. "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation" [4].

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because we examine a social phenomenon, sociological criticism is our preferred theory for this paper. Sociological approach to the study of literature holds that literature and other forms of creative arts should be examined/evaluated in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received.

This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society. To understand a writer's literary work(s), it may probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" because it (the approach) takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work" [5].

### DISCUSSION

Religion is a major agent of socialization. It is a way of showing people's way of life through worship. Religion is an integral aspect of culture which has to do with a people's mode of life. Every act of worship is a rite or ritualistic in nature. Religious matters are archetypal subjects not only in African literature but also in other arts around the world. It is observed that, since time immemorial, religion had been used to override, rule and, or cage human minds. In an attempt to subvert the perceived hypocritical tendencies of religious order, most African writers in their protest dialogues, undermine the two major imported religions (Christianity and Islam), which were imposed on Africans since the accidental contact between the natives and their invaders.

In most of Sembène Ousmane's literary works, there are often two different worlds. The African world view is always symbolized by majority of the characters, the masses and the oppressed while the remaining few characters represent the western world, the self-acclaimed lords; the colonial masters and of course the missionaries. In brain washing the Africans, some of them are given medals. But the question is what kind of medals? ...Medals of friendship, hypocrisy, mediocrity or stupid submission? A careful

reading of literary works like Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* (*The Old Man and the Medal*) and Sembène Ousmane's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (*God's Bits of Wood*) reveal that there are complicity in these issues of medals as they can be summarily described as meaningless medals, which worth nothing in the real sense of it!

There was an unholy fellowship between the religious institutions and the established political system. It can be argued that the four Cs; Colonialism, Christianity, Commerce and Civilization have undoubtedly brought complicity and confusion which have succeeded in setting man against himself; nations against nations and peoples against one another in the world all over.

In the world today, religion threatens to narrow the mutual understanding among nations. Apart from ethnicity and racism, religion is a divisive determinant. [6] observes thus: "Religion can either make men wise and virtuous, or fanatical and hypocritical. As the nation gets poorer, and the struggle for power and control of the dwindling resources of the nation gets fiercer, many will be disposed to resort to religion to promote their own selfish interests, by emphasizing religious differences and promoting religious antagonism".

In principle, Sembène Ousmane is dissatisfied with the Islamic culture in his creative writings particularly polygamy and fanaticism. He equally frowns at using religion to adjust, direct or control people's minds to achieve personal interests, which in most cases are laced with exploitative tendencies. It is hard to forget the character of El Hadji Mabigué, who does not share food with his own sister. Instead of helping his relatives at the time of need is preaching gospel to the helpless woman. In his words he says: "I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The *toubabs* are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it- why, look, they have even turned off the water..." (GBW, p. 45). The hypocritical tendency of this perceived devoted Muslim, El Hadji Mabigué is further consolidated by the various derogatory words his sister, Ramatoulaye used in painting him. He is called a fornicator, a thief and an old she-goat! (GBW, p. 45). Similarly, the chief Imam of Dakar is implicitly an agent of French imperialism. This can be confirmed through his role when he mediates between Ramatoulaye and the police, and his speech at the racecourse. The Imam rejects the strike action embarked upon by the railway workers. "...imams and the priests of other sects. After the prayers and religious services all over the city, there would be a sermon whose theme was always the same: By ourselves, we are incapable of creating any sort of

useful object, not even a needle; and yet you want to strike against the toubabs who have brought us all of these things! It is madness! You would do better to be thanking God for having brought them among us and bettering our lives with the benefits of their civilization and their Science” (GBW, p. 206). In a swift reaction, Bakayoko puts it directly to the so-called Chief Imam of Dakar thus: “The Imam spoke to you of God. Does that mean he doesn’t know that people who are hungry and thirsty are likely to forget the way to the mosque?” (GBW, p. 219). “Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction.” Ramatoulaye, one of the leading figures who insist in fighting injustice done to Africans in the story, *God’s Bits of Wood* can be said to be a Muslim, at least going by her name. But, her appearance and, or dressing mode reveal that she is deeply connected to African culture or tradition. The several amulets she wears around her neck and those fetish bracelets, which cover her arms to her elbow, are tangible proofs of her connection with the traditional African belief. However, Sembène Ousmane loves the kind of faithfulness displayed by Fa Keita, who continued to observe his prayer despite the humiliation he suffered in the hand of Bernadini, the commandant in the prison; believing that what is worth doing at all, is worth doing well. Let us take a peep into the picture of a scene at the camp: “And as Fa Keïta began to kneel, the commandant’s boot caught him in the kidney and hurled him head first into the strands of barbed wire. Little drops of blood flecked the skin of the old man’s shoulders and back...” (GBW, p. 236).

In Ousmane’s *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*, the writer paints the European quarters of Thiès as the “Vatican” to underscore the link between the established political system or order and the Christian religion. El Hadji Mabigué and the Sérigne N’Dakarou, the Chief Imam of Dakar are beneficiaries of the worthless medals in Ousmane’s *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. And, we do see the hypocritical tendencies in them as agents of the imperialists. With this, the writer manifests his ideological stance on religion. It is obvious that Sembène Ousmane is upset because he sees religion as a tool employed by the ruling elite to manipulate the masses so as to achieve personal gains. Religion is indeed an agent of neo-colonialism and “By neo-colonialism, we mean the practice of granting a sort of independence with the concealed intention of making the liberated country a client state, and controlling it effectively by means other than political ones.” [8] The

marriage between religious institutions and inhuman political system has worsen human living conditions, especially in Africa because the poor masses are the products of bad leadership or wicked governance and selfish religious order, which enslaves the minds.

Culture is the sum of all kinds of acquired or learnt attitudinal practices in a given human enclave. “Culture is the dearest possession of any human group and any human being. Anyone cut off from his culture is poor indeed... Problems rooted on culture therefore take time to eradicate because customs and traditions cannot be done away with overnight” [9]. In *Le Mandat*, certain traditional aspects of African belief are discussed. As painted by Sembène Oumane in his invented African society, there is a serious attachment to the supernatural. Ibrahima Dieng, Ousmane’s hero in the novel, demonstrates this by giving money to old Nogui despite his poverty level to make charms for him. « *Elle doit avoir un gris-gris pour me forcer la main* » (*Le Mandat*, p. 158). Africans believe strongly in the functionality of voodoo and African society has experts, who prepare such charms for protection and other purposes. In fact, Dieng holds seriously that traditional medicine can even be effective overseas. He promises to send some charms to Abdou in France. « *A la prochaine lettre, je t’enverrai des gris-gris. Malgré que tu ne sois pas à Ndakaru, tu dois te protéger. On peut te jeter un mauvais sort. Il y a ici un vrai marabout que j’irai voir pour toi* » (*Le Mandat*, p. 182). Despite all efforts made by different foreign religions, they were less successful in sacking Africans from indulging, whether secretly or openly, in practicing their traditions. Ibrahima Dieng, a very devoted Muslim is still strongly attached to his African custom and tradition as shown in his character traits. As a matter of fact, Ibrahima is an archetypical representation of most Africans, who claim to be Muslims or Christians.

Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be” a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development” [10].

Sembène Ousmane, in crafting development for his society via literature, kicks against religious uprising, which is a common social problem in Africa and the world at large. He links this ugly trend to ignorance and lack of knowledge on the part of the so-

---

called devotees of the two popular imported religions in Africa; Christianity and Islam. Knowledge is believed to be power but most Africans just take all they are told by their religious leaders or clerics hook, line and sinker primarily because they are unlettered and cannot read the religious holy books to ascertain things ; to verify and to consolidate what their religious leaders preach. Ndoffène, one of the characters in *Guelwaar* confirms: “Je ne sais pas lire le nassaran” (*Guelwaar*, p.89) [“I cannot read the Arabic words”]. In other words, the speaker is saying he cannot read the Qu’ran, the Holy Book, which contains all that a Muslim needs on this earth and the here-after. Surprisingly, the same man who cannot read the Qu’ran believes strongly that if he kills an unbeliever, it is an act of piety: “Tuer un yefèr est un acte de piété” (*Guelwaar*, p. 129). In his character traits, Ndoffène has demonstrated religious fanaticism which opens door for hatred and perhaps human destruction. Similarly, those who claimed they are Christians do not abide by the teachings of the religion because they are still not well informed about the “dos” and “don’ts” of the Christ religion. Or, out of their own free will, they just do what they like.

In *Guelwaar*, we see Christians taking second wife: “Chrétien de naissance, de famille chrétienne connue, Guignane prit une seconde épouse (*Guelwaar*”, p. 56). [“Christian by birth, from a well-known Christian family, Guignane took a second wife”]. Apart from violating the principle of one man, one wife which Christianity preaches, African Christians in *Guelwaar* drink around recklessly (p. 70).

Both the Muslims and the Christians need a thorough knowledge and understanding of the religions they practice so that they can live and co-exist harmoniously with each other. There is no religion that promotes or encourages hatred, killing, destruction of properties or any other forms of man inhumanity to man. Religious conflicts can only tear a society apart; they cannot facilitate the desired environment for any meaningful sustainable development. We can therefore submit that most religious chaos and/or brouhahas are caused as a result of inadequate knowledge of the practitioners of imported religions about what ought to be and what ought not to be as regards their adopted faith. The glorious Qu’ran and the holy Bible advise us to seek knowledge before we serve God, so that we can serve Him well; since people without knowledge will perish. The enactment of a religious satire of a sort in *Guelwaar* is Sembène Ousmane’s selfless contribution in informing his fellow Africans to sincerely know and understand God before they worship Him in whatever religion they find themselves. Religious conflicts are often value based and difficult to deal with. Hence, they must be avoided at every level of the society, at all times.

In achieving his aim, Ousmane has adopted the use of satire and without doubt, he has rationalized the

position of Wellek and Warren. “Only a person who has knowledge of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behavior are reproduced in the novel” [11]. All of these efforts are attempts to use literature to develop the society. Yes, it is not an effort in futility; rather it is a calculated exercise in sagacity.

## CONCLUSION

There are the positive and the negative sides of religions. Religions can make man submissive; easy to control or on the other hand, it can make man fanatical and destructive. “Writers are surgeons of the heart and souls of a community” [12]; Justifying this statement, Sembène Ousmane demonstrates in various ways the manifestations of religious institutions with a genuine intention to principally expose and correct the sad side of this domineering social order. In undermining the Islamic religion, the most popular religion in Senegal, his native country, the novelist and film-maker x-rays and condemns the robust relationship between the state/the existing political arrangement and the religion, which is indeed hypocritically rooted. In *Les Bouts de bois...* and *Le Mandat*, Ousmane frowns at religious hypocrisy which takes the centre stage in the scheme of societal affairs. He is sad that most religious leaders and the devotees do not practice what they preach. In *Guelwaar*, the writer condemns the activities of religious extremists, who see nothing good in those people that belong to any other religion because they see such individuals as unbelievers.

This paper has shown, to some extent that Sembène Ousmane’s creative writing is a protest dialogue on the hypocritical tendencies of religious institutions not only in Senegal but also in African society generally. What the writer wants is a religion which will enhance man’s wisdom and understanding, promote true friendship, peace and mutual co-operation among people and across nations. It is therefore obvious that Africans need a thorough rebirth as regards what they actually believe in and how best they really want to worship or connect themselves to what or who(m) they believe. One thing is clear; it is difficult to separate people away from their culture. Culture, we should not forget, is “the totality of people’s way of life, its way of organizing its affairs, of viewing the natural and the man-made world, of meeting universal human needs, its hierarchy of values or criteria that determines its behavior and thought in brief, a people’s view of the world, its social heritage”[13]. And consolidating the aforementioned position; “What we have, we hold. What though the wind of change is blowing over this entire continent, our principles and traditions – yes, must be maintained. For we are threatened. Yes, we are indeed threatened...but we are entitled to match you history for history to the nearest half-million souls” [14]. As social commentators, we have tried to separate what is perceived to be pure fancy from realistic

---

observations and, or expressions of the intended desires as well as sentiments of our chosen writer.

#### Abbreviation

GBW = *God's Bits of Wood*

#### Ousmane Sembène's literary works used as corpus

Ousmane S; *God's bits of wood*, London, Heinemann, 1962.

Ousmane S; *Le mandat*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1966.

Ousmane S; *Guelwaar*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1996.

#### REFERENCES

1. Lamarque P; Fictional entities. Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of philosophy, New York & London. Routledge, 2000; 285.
2. Rockwell J; Fact in fiction. London, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1974; vii.
3. Adeoti G, Elegbeleye SO; Nigerian literary drama and satiric mode as exemplified in Wole Soyinka's Works in Olateju M and Oyeleye L. (ed), Perspective on language and literature, Ibadan, Intec Printers Ltd, 2005; 303 – 321.
4. Wellek R, Warren A; The theory of literature. London, Penguin Books, 1968; 228.
5. Irele A; The criticism of modern African literature, in Christopher Heywood (ed.); Perspective on African literature, London, Heinemann. 1971; 9 - 24.
6. Fafowora O; Selected essays and speeches on Nigerian diplomacy, politics, and economics, Ibadan, Dokun Publishing House, 2001; 248.
7. Warnock J; Presenting reality: readings in literary non-fiction. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989; xvii.
8. Barango Y; Neo-colonialism and African politics. New York; Vantage Press, 1980; 5.
9. Okeh. P; Dialectics of feminist phenomenon in Francophone African writings in Ade Ojo Sam (ed.), Feminism in francophone African literature, Ibadan, Signal Educational Services Ltd, 2003; 1 – 43.
10. Ogundokun SA ; Jean Pliya's La secrétaire particulière as an archetype of satire, IISTE Research on Humanities and Social Sciences. 2013;3 (4):52 – 56.
11. Wellek R, Warren A; Theory of literature, London, Penguin Books, 1973; 104.
12. Wa Thiong ON; Decolonizing the mind: the politics of language in African literature, Nairobi, EAEP Ltd, 1981; ix.
13. Laing E; Science and society in Ghana, (Accra, Academy of Arts and Science, Ghana, 1990;1.
14. Soyinka W; Madmen and specialists, Ibadan, University Press Plc, 2007; 70 – 71.