origins. The writer's account of his observations of and participation in the creation of the Organization of African Unity, as well as his retrospective reflections about it, is especially illuminating and spell-binding.

Particularly informative in this regard is chapter 10, "As the Sun King Becomes Africa's Father." Here Selassie captures, in all of its nuance, the drama surrounding the OAU's founding in 1963—with its seriousness of purpose, hilarious moments, gratifications and disappointment, mischief and intrigue—as played out at one of the largest gatherings of the first generation of postcolonial African leaders. Still, a reader interested in the subject will be disappointed by the brevity of his account unless it is realized that this is a memoir and not a treatise.

In short, these are the reflections of a participant-observer who helped create, or at least closely observed the creation of, unity in Africa, however embryonic. Selassie also presided over (or perhaps contributed to) the splintering of Africa, and managed the secession (or as Selassie puts it, the liberation) of Eritrea, although from early childhood he was wary of a border's tendency to "divid[e] people" (45).

Selassie's extraordinary proximity to the corridors of power in Ethiopia and beyond gives authority and credence to many of his theories. But the best way to read this book would be to focus on its most objectively factual observations rather than on the author's subjective interpretation of historical events. This is one of the most valuable memoirs to be penned by a postcolonial African. It shines useful light on the making and unmaking of the Ethiopian empire.

Seifudein Adem
State University of New York at Binghamton
Binghamton, New York
adems@binghamton.edu

Samba Gadjigo. *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist.* Translated by Moustapha Diop. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xxvi + 188 pp. Illustrations. Biographical chronology. Index. $50. Cloth. $19.95. Paper.

Three years ago, Samba Gadjigo published his first volume on the life of Sembène Ousmane, *Ousmane Sembène: Une conscience africaine* (Editions Homnispheres). It has now appeared in English translation, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist.* Although a number of excellent studies of Sembène's work have appeared, including Françoise Pfaff's important early *Cinema of Sembène Ousmane: A Pioneer of African Film* (Greenwood Press, 1984), and the more recent *Ousmane Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (Africa World Press, 2003) by David Murphy, neither of these or the many other collections, articles, or books on Sembène's work could be properly called a biography.

In fact it is quite rare for a biography of an African author, much less a filmmaker, to appear in print, though many autobiographies have been written (most notably three by Wole Soyinka). Sembène merits this attention for a few reasons. First, his written works occupy an important site in committed anticolonial and anti-neocolonial literature. He made the notion of struggle central in all of his work, including especially that of the poor, the underclass, represented at times by the lumpenproletariat, or more accurately street people—beggars, handicapped, the impoverished, victims of capitalist exploitation and theft. He gave us the vocabulary for discussing the left agenda in an African setting. He advocated for women before most women authors advocated for women ("Voltaique" and *"La Noire de..."* appeared in 1962, and *Vehi Ciosane* in 1966—fourteen years before Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*). He advocated for workers in his masterpiece, *God's Bits of Wood* (Heinemann, 1996), when writing about the working class as such was, as it remains, almost unheard of in African literature. He embodied the political resistance of the left for an African community whose dominant literary trends had focused more on racial pride and responding to colonial discourses—that is, on Négritude, an ideology he never found to be meaningful for the people whom he sought to represent—than on class solidarity.

And yet it was not his writings that gave him pride of place in African letters: it was cinema. His early efforts were not entirely alone: Jean Rouch enabled Oumarou Ganda to develop an approach to film that differed significantly from Sembène's. However, it was the schools of filmmakers from Senegal, Burkina, and Mali that developed in the 1970s, first under the influence of Donskoy and Russian social realism, and then under the influence of the Africans themselves—Sembène, Cissé, Traore, Kabore, Ouédraogo—that became the dominant tendency. Above all it was Sembène who could be said to have launched this first generation, although all the others were quite distinct in their own styles and preoccupations.

Honorific titles came to be attributed to Sembène, risking freezing him into the roles implied by the terms "Father of African Cinema" or "Griot." Yet he succeeded in maintaining his own distinctive style, even if his successes were at times uneven. Gadjigo's study is truly a hagiographic text. It seeks to understand Sembène, not so as to offer a critique, but to explain away his flaws, and more important, to account for his considerable, unequaled accomplishment. Sembène comes to bear the burden here of Great Author, a mantle he would have been uncomfortable wearing.

That said, this study accomplishes a number of feats. The subtitle "The Making of a Militant Artist" defines the scope of the biography: the period in Sembène's life before he became a filmmaker, including his early years growing up in the Casamance, his youth in Dakar, and then his early manhood in Marseilles. There is an attempt to account for his personality and the strengths he developed in his life from his experiences in each instance.

Thus, he was a rebellious child when he was young—perhaps partly because of the absence of his mother in his childhood—and this presumably led to his strength of character as he grew older. He resented his uncle's exploitation of his labor as an adolescent in Dakar, and this ostensibly accounted for his understanding of the plight of workers later in his life. He resented the colonialist's racism, and thus his solidarity with left programs in France, and so on. In all instances, there is an attempt not only to account for the great man's traits, but also for his identity, because this study is nothing if not devoted to the notion that there is a core, authentic location within the man that accounts for who he is.

The language becomes quite flowery at times, in the attempt to reach for this essence: Casamance becomes a tropical paradise, especially thanks to its waterways, and Sembène is seen as having been formed by the environment there. Dakar provided a setting in which the love for cinema would develop, where street politics were constantly surrounding him, and where the spectacle of injustice rankled. In all of these environs Gadjigo made a yeomanlike effort to track down those who knew Sembène in the 1930s and '40s, aware that time was not on the biographer's side and that he had no other way to obtain solid information on his subject. Written sources are rare, and Sembène refused to provide him with detailed information. Thus the "real" reason for Sembène's leaving the Casamance and coming to Dakar at the age of 15 remains speculative; and the "real" reason for his departure from Dakar to Marseilles in 1946 also remains uncertain. However, if the character study appears rudimentary, the descriptions of the milieux in which Sembène functioned during those years are valiant, with historical and cultural contexts provided in some detail.

For me the highlight of this work, by far, lies in the description of the political and intellectual life Sembène experienced in Marseilles from 1946 until his definitive return to Dakar in 1960. It is not so much the tedious descriptions of labor as a stevedore that yield a meaningful understanding of the author-filmmaker who was to emerge, but rather his encounter with the Communist Party and its intellectuals who were striving to create a vibrant political movement during those postwar years, and his intellectual growth as a reader of leftist literature and as an author of proletarian novels. His strong attraction to Jack London's works and life, the influence of Richard Wright, his refusal to adhere to the directions being developed by the intellectual African community in Paris, led by Senghor—all these provided a powerful foundation for his political commitments that translated into a certain fidelity to the common man and woman. *Borom Sarret* and *La Noire de....* might be on the horizon, and *Le Docker noir* might have been his point of departure, but we can now read them in light of those years in Marseilles with a certainty as to the locus of what that commitment meant.

And here is the surprising discovery. Not that the author is not dead, but that the life of the author, read here in its fullest sense as a moment in the larger social context, has an inevitable bearing on our understanding

of the texts. Not in the sense that it provides the texts with the key to their meaning, that process still being subject to the same play of interpretation as before. But that the horizon of our readings will acquire a certain solidity; that there is a powerful thrust of the times that enables our readings to pass into the illusion of certainty, not about meaning as much as about value and effect. Sembène cared profoundly about the community within which he discovered the meaning of struggle. He was faithful to that for the rest of his life. His films demanded, like Arthur Miller's plays, that "attention must be paid" because there was so much at stake in his conception of an art that was always in the service of a meaningful cause: the struggle for those who could not prevail on their own, who could not face an oppressive order on their own, whose lives acquired meaning, as did that of Sembène, through solidarity.

Kenneth Harrow
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan
harrow@msu.edu

https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2011.0022 Published online by Cambridge University Press