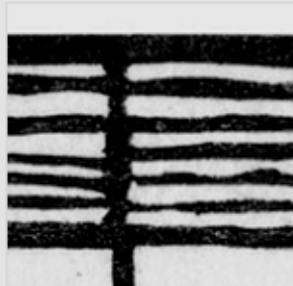
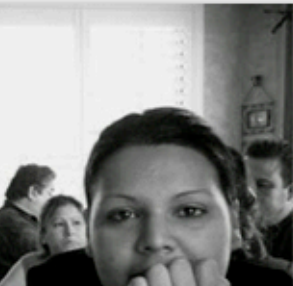




# Ousmane Sembene



Daily explorations of art, culture, media, history, science, politics, books, technology, and nature...



V1.06

# Ousmane Sembene

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History

[www.thewright.org](http://www.thewright.org)

Daily History Gems



**Ousmane Sembene** is called the father of African cinema. The son of a fisherman, he was born in Senegal in 1923. Through film and writing he became the ‘griot’ of the continent.

## Thought Questions

Look for these answers as you read:

What were the names of Sembene’s two books?

What year did Ousmane produce his first film, *Black Girl*?

Did he have a philosophy as an artist?

What does Sembene say about the younger generation?

What is the purpose of solidarity?

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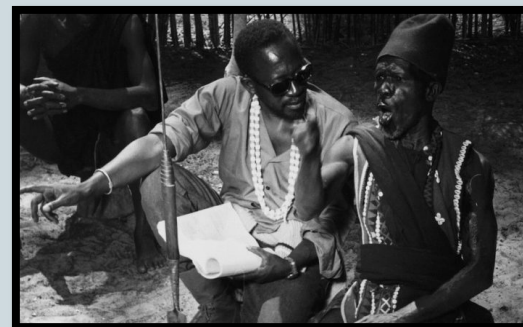


Ousmane Sembene (January 1, 1923 – June 9, 2007) was a Senegalese writer and director of *Black Girl*, *Ceddo*, and *Camp de Thiaroye*. Education Director Reggie Woolery of the Charles H. Wright Museum was able to interview him for *BOMB Magazine*.

“Dressed in a regal blue robe, hobbling slightly, biting down on his signature bowed pipe, his descent upon Ouaga (pronounced warmly *Waga*), signifies the essential mix of art, industry and style that draws the international film community to FESPACO (Pan African Film and Television Festival de Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso) every two years.”

**Reginald Woolery:** “You end *Camp de Thiaroye* with all the soldiers being massacred by the French. In contrast, your new film *Guelwaar* is almost comic in its premise. How did you get from there to here?”

**Ousmane Sembene:** “Since *Ceddo*, which was the last film I made ten years before *Thiaroye*, my master plan has been – African solutions can only come from Africa itself. In that sense, I really haven’t changed anything. People who come to my movies still do it for the same reasons.”



Ousmane Sembene directing non-actors



Black Girl, 1965



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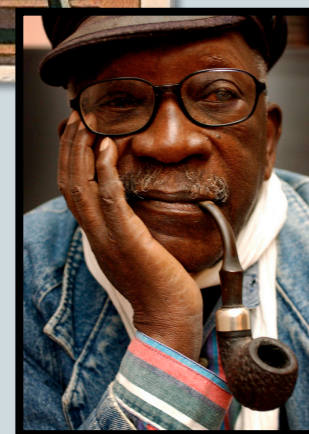
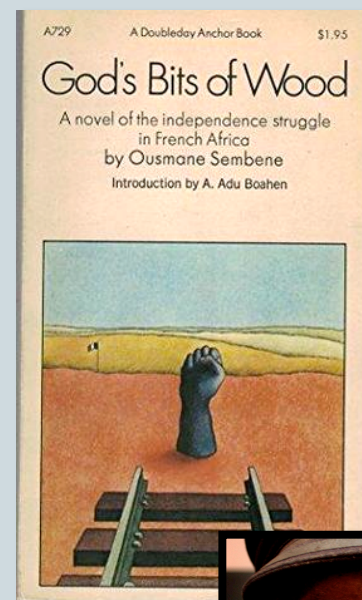


**RW:** “I have read your novels, *God’s Bits of Wood* and *The Black Docker*, and was really impressed with the complexity of your characters. You started making movies because people had stopped reading. How do you go about creating your stories?”

**OS:** “I myself am a living paradox. I’m full of contradictions. Manthia (Diawara) asks me that all the time, and I don't know how to answer. I assure you. I have no secrets. I don’t like to explain anything, but I use Marxist dialectics to try to understand the walk of the individual within a community.

The dynamics of Marxist economic theory are very important to creating this complexity. Man needs to eat, but did he produce what he’s eating or did someone else? These are the questions that arise when I’m writing.

There is a proverb in Bambara that says, *‘If you manage to eat for a whole year without touching your wallet, it’s because you are living in someone else’s pocket.’* So when you’re in contact with a man like that, you have to describe his whole mentality as well as the society surrounding him, to understand how he thinks.”



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**RW:** “When Manthia and Ngugi (wa Thiong'o) were filming you in Dakar, you had an exchange with a group of high school students. Everyone was impressed by their questions. They really challenged you on your symbolism and how you construct roles. How does this relationship with a younger community help the creative process?”

**OS:** “Meeting my people enriches me. It gives me courage. It helps me correct myself, and question myself. It helps me re-shape myself. I’m 70 years old and I’m talking to 20-year old children. How can I operate mentally with all these young guys? They have their hand on the pulse of the culture.”

**RW:** “When you made your first feature, *Black Girl*, in 1965, you had to show your films in Europe and eventually create a structure for African countries to show African films.”

**OS:** “It hasn’t been me alone! The African cinema is a group effort. Frankly, we are too weak to work on an individual basis. No matter your age, or how long you’ve been involved in filmmaking, when you participate with someone, you learn from them. You share your feelings with the others. It creates a feeling of solidarity. That is the main thing, in fact.”



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**Photographs:**

Fespaco 93, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso Africa; polaroids courtesy of Reggie Woolery

**Texts:**

*BOMB Magazine*, February 25, 1993, No. 43, “Ousmane Sembene interview by John Singleton & Reggie Woolery” [www.bombmagazine.org/articles/ousmane-sembene/](http://www.bombmagazine.org/articles/ousmane-sembene/)

*Cinema Escapist* magazine online, “Introduction to the Father of African Cinema”  
[www.cinemaescapist.com/2018/06/introduction-ousmane-sembene/](http://www.cinemaescapist.com/2018/06/introduction-ousmane-sembene/)

**Notes:**

Ousmane Sembene’s books were recently translated into English, having been written in his native Wolof and French – thus their relative inaccessibility is perhaps the reason they are not as popular in English-speaking Africa as the works of his contemporaries such as Chinua Achebe, Okot P’Bitek, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o.