

RC: Reading Comprehension Mastery – Passage 1

Many critics agree that the primary characteristic of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène's work is its sociopolitical commitment. Sembène was trained in Moscow in the cinematic methods of socialist

- (5) realism, and he asserts that his films are not meant to entertain his compatriots, but rather to raise their awareness of the past and present realities of their society. But his originality as a filmmaker lies most strikingly in his having successfully adapted film, originally a Western cultural medium, to the needs, pace, and structures of West African culture. In particular, Sembène has found within African oral culture techniques and strategies that enable him to express his views and to reach both literate and nonliterate Senegalese viewers.

- A number of Sembène's characters and motifs can be traced to those found in traditional West African storytelling. The tree, for instance, which in countless West African tales symbolizes knowledge, life, death, and rebirth, is a salient motif in *Emitai*. The trickster, usually a dishonest individual who personifies antisocial traits, appears in *Borom Sarret*, *Mandabi*, and *Xala* as a thief, a corrupted civil servant, and a member of the elite, respectively. In fact, most of Sembène's characters, like those of many oral West African narratives, are types embodying collective ideas or attitudes. And in the oral tradition, these types face archetypal predicaments, as is true, for example, of the protagonist of *Borom Sarret*, who has no name and is recognizable instead by his trade—he is a street merchant—and by the difficulties he encounters but is unable to overcome.

- Moreover, many of Sembène's films derive their structure from West African dilemma tales, the outcomes of which are debated and decided by their audiences. The open-endedness of most of his plots reveals that Sembène similarly leaves it to his viewers to complete his narratives: in such films as *Borom Sarret*, *Mandabi*, and *Ceddo*, for example, he provides his spectators with several alternatives as the films end. The openness of his narratives is also evidenced by his frequent use of freeze-frames, which carry the suggestion of continued action.

- Finally, like many West African oral tales, Sembène's narratives take the form of initiatory journeys that bring about a basic change in the worldview of the protagonist and ultimately, Sembène hopes, in that of the viewer. His films denounce social and political injustice, and his protagonists' social consciousness emerges from an acute self-consciousness brought about by the juxtaposition of opposites within the films' social context: good versus evil, powerlessness versus power, or poverty versus wealth. Such binary oppositions are used analogously in West African tales, and it seems likely that these

dialectical elements are related to African oral storytelling more than, as many critics have supposed, to the Marxist components of his ideology.

1. Which one of the following most accurately states the main point of the passage?
- (A) Sembène's originality as a filmmaker lies in his adaptation of traditional archetypal predicaments and open-ended plots, both of which are derived from West African oral tales.
- (B) Many of the characters in Sembène's films are variations on character types common to traditional West African storytelling.
- (C) Sembène's films derive their distinctive characteristics from oral narrative traditions that had not previously been considered suitable subject matter for films.
- (D) Sembène's films give vivid expression to the social and political beliefs held by most of the Senegalese people.
- (E) Sembène's films are notable in that they use elements derived from traditional West African storytelling to comment critically on contemporary social and political issues.

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE.

2. The author says that Sembène does which one of the following in at least some of his films?
- (A) uses animals as symbols
 - (B) uses slow motion for artistic effect
 - (C) provides oral narration of the film's story
 - (D) juxtaposes West African images and Marxist symbols
 - (E) leaves part of the story to be filled in by audiences
3. Which one of the following would, if true, most strengthen the claim made by the author in the last sentence of the passage (lines 54–58)?
- (A) Several African novelists who draw upon the oral traditions of West Africa use binary oppositions as fundamental structures in their narratives, even though they have not read Marxist theory.
 - (B) Folklorists who have analyzed oral storytelling traditions from across the world have found that the use of binary oppositions to structure narratives is common to many of these traditions.
 - (C) When he trained in Moscow, Sembène read extensively in Marxist political theory and worked to devise ways of synthesizing Marxist theory and the collective ideas expressed in West African storytelling.
 - (D) Very few filmmakers in Europe or North America make use of binary oppositions to structure their narratives.
 - (E) Binary oppositions do not play an essential structuring role in the narratives of some films produced by other filmmakers who subscribe to Marxist principles.
4. Which one of the following inferences about Sembène is most strongly supported by the passage?
- (A) His films have become popular both in parts of Africa and elsewhere.
 - (B) He has not received support from government agencies for his film production.
 - (C) His films are widely misunderstood by critics in Senegal.
 - (D) His characters are drawn from a broad range of social strata.
 - (E) His work has been subjected to government censorship.
5. Which one of the following most closely expresses the author's intended meaning in using the word "initiatory" (line 45)?
- (A) beginning a series
 - (B) experimental
 - (C) transformative
 - (D) unprecedented
 - (E) prefatory
6. The passage does NOT provide evidence that Sembène exhibits which one of the following attitudes in one or more of his films?
- (A) disenchantment with attempts to reform Senegalese government
 - (B) confidence in the aptness of using traditional motifs to comment on contemporary issues
 - (C) concern with social justice
 - (D) interest in the vicissitudes of ordinary people's lives
 - (E) desire to educate his audience