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Masculinities in Ousmane Sembene's God's bits of wood

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CHAPTER TWO: BLACK WORKERS MASCULINITIES

The urban blacks who worked for the railway company produced varied masculinities in their relations with the French. Connell (2001) suggests three non-hegemonic categories of masculinity in order to make sense of the relationships between groups of men. These categories, which include subordinate, complicit and marginalized are a move away from power. Unlike the first two, marginalized masculinities are created when there is an interplay of gender with such structures as class and race. Therefore, marginalization refers to "the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups" (42). Connell adds that black masculinity is shaped by unemployment and poverty when interacting with racism. Robert Morrell (1998:607) uses the terms oppositional or protest to refer to marginalized masculinity. In other words, the marginalized or dominated group is presented as oppositional to the dominant masculinity.

Ousmane Sembene portrays in his novel workers who lead an impoverished life. For example, in Bamako, at the meeting of the workers who are voting to go on strike, we learn that the strike is all about "being robbed. Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between ourselves and animals" (8). Tiemoko, a member of the strike committee, states:

> We're the ones who do the work, […] the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? In what way is a white child better than a black child? In what way is a white worker better than a black worker? They tell us we have the same rights, but it is a lie, nothing but a lie! Only the engines we run tell the truth – and they don't know the difference between a white man

> and a black. It does no good just to look at our pay slips and say that our wages are too small. If we want to live decently we must fight! (8).

In Thies, the elderly and tuberculous Bakary says:

> I thought they [strikers] were talking just about salaries, but I went to their meetings, and I found that they were talking about a pension, too – a pension that would affect us, and not just the young ones. Look around you […] Look around you. Ther are not very many of us any more. Where are all the others – Aliou Samba, and Abdoulaye, and Coulibaly, and the Davids who came from the island of Goree – they had no pension, and now they are dead. Soon it will be our turn, and what are we to live on? And the fathers of the white men, the ones who taught us our trade – the Edouards and the Henris and the Delacollines – where are they? They are living at home again, and they have their pensions. Why should we not have this pension, too? (17-18).

Exploitation created circumstances that made possible the development of a class-based oppositional masculinity. The circumstances are similar to those found in Morrell's (2001) study of South Africa in the apartheid era when working conditions and remuneration for work were radically different. Whites had always remained in supervisory jobs and the brutalized, low paid African workers, who lacked trade unions, consequently evolved a violent, confrontational masculinity. (Morrell 2001: 16-17). Likewise, when the railway workers in three French West African cities decided to go on strike, they exhibited an oppositional masculinity to their employers.

Oppositional masculinity

In this chapter, oppositional masculinity refers to the type of masculinity which developed to protest against injustice and exploitation. In Ousmane's novel it was characterized by opposition to the management of the railway company whose policies were oppressive and unjust. The union leaders remind the white men during the negotiations that theirs is a not a race struggle but a class struggle. For

example, when Dejean accused them of being used by "Bolsheviks" or communists to insult "a great nation and a great people", Lahbib answers, "You do not represent a nation or a people here, but simply a class. We represent another class, whose interests are not the same as yours. We are trying to find a common meeting ground, and that is all" (184). When Dejean further wonders where the black workers would be without France and the French people, Ibrahim Bakayoko reiterates, "We know what France represents […] and we respect it. We are in no sense anti-French; but once again, Monsieur le directeur, this is not a question of France or of her people. It is a question of employees and their employer" (184-185).

Black workers' masculinities can be classified as those informed by courage, erudition and determination, yet others are marked by cowardice and self interest. The injustices and inequalities in the railway company were so glaring and unbearable that black workers' masculinities need to be affirmed in terms of their opposition against the French power structure. Physical and rhetorical resistance to the French management determined how masculine a black worker was. Yet other kinds of masculinities are constructed by Sembene in a context where men are shown to have lost their power to colonial employers.

Ibrahim Bakayoko, the spirit and soul of the strike (188) is represented as aggressive, informed/enlightened, eloquent and courageous. His actions and utterances present a pattern of a desirable oppositional masculinity, of the kind other men strive for. It is no wonder Arame (wife of one of the workers) states with reference to him: "Everybody says that he could end the strike if he wanted to"

(60). He influences workers and women alike, even in his absence. Daouda Beaugosse wonders at this man "whose shadow reached into every house, touching every object? His words and his ideas were everywhere, and even his name filled the air like an echo" (64). Elsewhere, the narrator says that "the strength that was in them [workers] came from Bakayoko" (188).

Bakayoko's knowledge exudes masculinity. A number of characters, in trying to convince others, invoke his name or quote him. For instance, while rallying the undecided and rebuking the defectors, Samba N'Doulougou says, "I can smell out the cowards a hundred meters off […] It's too bad Bakayoko isn't here; if he were, they wouldn't talk like that!" (19). Deune, a committee member in Dakar, confesses that he had always despised people from Dahomey until he heard Bakayoko's talk on "the pitfalls of citizenship." He adds, "Bakayoko is right – this strike has taught us a lot of things" (38-39). When Beaugosse and N'Deye Touti meet, they discuss Bakayoko, to the discomfort of Beaugosse. N'Deye Touti, a pretty girl who had gone to a teacher training college and who admired Bakayoko, says she first met him at a wedding where he told them about "the problems of the workers. But he talked about all sorts of things – unemployment, the educational system, the war in Indochina: he talked about France and Spain, and even about countries as far away as America and Russia" (62). The narrator tells us that the suffering strikers would stand outside the railway station and the blowing wind seemed to whisper to them "a phrase they had often heard from Bakayoko: 'The kind of man we were is dead, and our only hope for a new life lies in the machine which knows neither a language nor a race'" (76). The narrator further says that the idea of trying Diara, the traitor or scab, "and even the manner in which it was

being handled, had come from a book in Bakayoko's library" (79). Doudou reminisced about his appointment to the position of secretary-general; he had been a very poor speaker until Bakayoko gave him books to read. Bakayoko told him: "We can't afford to risk defeat now, just because of our own ignorance. The way you were talking to those men you couldn't even convince Ad'jibid'ji [Bakayoko's young daughter]" (146-147). Doudou had gradually improved his knowledge and skills and became popular with the strikers. Such is the force that Sembene attributes to this charismatic man; the reader hears invocations of Bakayoko's name and quotations of his words before actually meeting him in person.

Oppositional masculinity is furthermore emphasized through wisdom, assertiveness, foresight and enlightenment. Bakayoko's counter arguments in meetings with both the French managers and the black committee members bring out his exceptional enlightenment, vision, assertiveness and wisdom. When Monsieur Edouard held a meeting with the delegates, he easily convinced them to drop three of their demands and go back to work as the management gradually improved their working conditions. But just before they voted, Bakayoko explained why they could not afford to drop any demands. He provoked the delegates into rethinking their position by posing two questions:

> This generous gentleman has come here to tell us that the question of family allowances must be thought in terms of the figures for last year's operations. Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that they must be thought of in terms of the fact that some of us have more than one wife, and they don't want to give us the allowance for that reason? […] He tells us also that to be entitled to a pension the old men must pass tests to determine their technical employment level. But when they were recruited to work on the line twenty or thirty years ago, did anyone ask them about their technical level? (17)

By the time he finished speaking, the committee members had changed their minds, and the embittered Edouard left the meeting dreading Bakayoko's power to influence people.

In yet another meeting between the delegates and the management, Bakayoko suggests to Dejean that the exploitation of the workers had "lasted long enough" (182). He further dismisses the idea of African deputies to the National Assembly mediating between the workers and the managers. He observes that the deputies' "mandate is simply a license to profiteer" as they (deputies) have become allies of the French (184), so they cannot mediate between the two parties.

Bakayoko's wisdom and strong will are further seen when the delegates in Thies debate in a heated manner whether their women should march to Dakar or not. The narrator says, "Balla expressed the opinion of many when he said, 'I'm against letting the women go. It's normal that they should support us; a wife should support her husband, but from that to a march on Dakar … No, I vote against it'"(187). Just before they could vote, Bakayoko told them, "We have no right to discourage anyone who wants to strike a blow for us […] It may be just that blow that is needed. If the women have decided, all that is left for us to do is to help them" (188). The women were allowed to march to Dakar and as it turned out, their blow was what the strikers needed to succeed in their mission.

Bakayoko's intelligent and critical remarks are further seen at the racecourse meeting in Dakar. This meeting had attracted an enormous crowd of strikers, dock workers, fishermen and workers of all the big factories. After the Imam (spiritual

leader), the governor, and the mayor-deputy had spoken to the crowd, the discontented Bakayoko courageously breaks protocol by taking the microphone because he thought it was unfair to deny the strikers a chance to speak at the meeting. He began by punching holes in the speeches they had listened to. He threw barbs at the white governors and managers and the black deputies. After accusing the speakers of using a language which the majority did not understand, he directed his rhetorical virulence against the way in which they had ignored the pertinent issues.

> 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? You were told also that the governors have brought you many wonderful improvements and changes. It is true that I am young, but I haven't seen very many of them, and I could call on the older workers to tell us what they have seen! We can't feed our families on projects! And you were also told that there would be no sanctions against us – but did anyone say whether there would be sanctions against those who have killed women and children? […] It seems that this strike is the work of a little group of black sheep, led by foreigners. If this is so, there must be a lot of black sheep in this country; and you, who know us all, look at me and tell me who are the foreigners […] We are told that some of our demands will be satisfied, but which ones? […] Our deputy told us that he had come here to help us. Ask him then why he cannot apply in his own country the same social laws he votes for in a country far from here. Ask him how he lives, and how much he earns (219-220).

Since he spoke in Ouolof, the governor and the European delegates understood little; however, the deputy who understood the language, fidgeted uneasily in his chair. Prompted on by the crowd, Bakayoko then added,

> When we had our discussion with the management, they told us that our demand for family allowances could not be considered because our wives and our mothers are really only concubines. But when it was a matter of going off to be killed in the war, did anyone ask the patriots who volunteered if they were legitimate or illegitimate? Ask your deputy to answer that question, too (220).

He then concluded by challenging the masons, carpenters, fitters, fishermen, dockers, policemen, militiamen, civil servants and office workers to understand

that the strike was theirs too – not just the trainmen's. Their collective effort would ensure that their wives and children see a better life. He emerges a hero because, as a result of his speech, a ten-day general strike is called by other unions.

In constructing Bakayoko as an admirable oppositional figure, the issue of his masculinity is seen as an integral part of his words, his actions and his consciousness as a spokesperson for the oppressed workers in French West Africa.

Bakayoko shines at rallies and meetings not only because of his erudition, but also because of his eloquence. He is a good orator. This skill is illustrated in Monsieur Edouard's report that states: "Bakayoko, their leader, raised more than fifty thousand francs when he spoke at a meeting in Saint-Louis" (170).

Furthermore, Bakayoko is represented as being courageous. For example, during the delegates meeting with the management, he is warned against speaking in a manner that would cause him trouble. He, however, retorts, "Monsieur […] we are here for a discussion among equals, and not to listen to your threats" (182). And later during the negotiations when Monsieur Dejean tells delegates that their demands are too much, Bakayoko daringly asks, "Don't you think this thieving has lasted long enough?" (182). As a result of the remarks, the anti-Bakayoko hostility among the French men grows even more, especially in Dejean who goes ahead to slap him hard on the face. Bakayoko, we are told, jumped to his feet and seized the director by the throat. He maintained his hold for some time despite the pleas from his colleagues. He was however able to control his violent urge to kill him.

Oppositional masculinity is also exhibited in the way some union leaders invalidate the racist belief that blacks "are all rotten with pride" (30) and are easily persuaded out of their stances (however radical) by use of titles and money. As Memmi notes, "the colonized is never considered in a positive light"(1990:149). In fact, Isnard, an 'old hand' in the colony believed, "We can buy off the most important leaders" (32). His view is supported by Victor who says it would be simpler to end the strike that way. Dejean too says: "You can buy every one of these Negroes! […] Any of them, and all of them"(31). These sentiments confirm Memmi's assertion that "another sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ('They are this.' 'They are all the same.')" (1990:151). Aware of the connotations of being called 'children' and knowing how whites assailed African moral and intellectual capacities, Doudou sets out to disprove this erroneous belief. Isnard approached him in the street and flattered him before telling him about the promotion prospects and the monetary gains if he called off the strike. Isnard says:

> The appointments are effective as of four months ago. That means you would get a pay rise for the whole time all at once – a nice little bundle. You could afford a new wife! […] But that isn't all. I saw Monsieur Dejean, the director, the other day. You don't know him now, but you will. He knows you, and we talked about you. You know, I'm going to be retiring soon and – well, it's you who are going to take my place. It should be Drame, because of his seniority, but he doesn't know how to read. So you see, you will soon be taking my place, and then you can have three or four wives if you like, not just two. You're a damned lucky fellow (150).

Isnard then quickly adds:

> Ah […] you almost made me forget the most important thing. Monsieur Dejean told me that I could put three million francs at your disposition right away. It's not a bribe – I know the African too well for that, and I know it would never work with you. It's just an advance. What do you think about that? Three million francs in the company's money – good for anything you

want around here (150).

Doudou was silent for a while before he asked, “Are you trying to buy me?” at which Isnard answered he was not. Isnard added another enticement: Doudou would be on the management staff. Moreover, Negro workers were as good as white, he said, and Doudou quickly asked why then they did not have the same advantages. To the irritation, humiliation and disbelief of Isnard, Doudou declined to accept the attractive offers and told Isnard before he walked away, “Well you can keep them [three million francs] and tell Dejean that whenever he wants to talk about the men going back to work the committee will be at his disposition” (152). With this action and his reasonable arguments, Doudou clearly demonstrated the invalidity of the racist beliefs that Africans always accept bribes. Another aspect Ousmane attributes to black oppositional masculinity therefore is integrity and steadfastness.

Oppositional masculinity is consciously constructed in the committee members in terms of protecting the interests of the strikers. This masculinity is informed by loyalty and self-sacrificing service to the strikers’ cause. These leaders struggle for the welfare of the black workers at the expense of their narrow, individual and family interests. For example, while in Thies, Bakayoko receives a letter from his wife Assitan in Bamako. It says the police killed his mother, Niakoro, arrested Fa Keita, and hurt Ad’jibid’ji. Bakary pleads with him to visit his family at once, but he declines. He claims, in a selfless manner, that he has to go to Dakar to make preparations on how to receive the women marchers, and after all, there were many houses in mourning. He adds, “We must fight for the living and not give our time

to thinking of the dead" (190). Bakary could only murmur, "Sometimes […] I wonder if you have a heart" (190).

Doudou too, who had been appointed secretary of the strike committee, preoccupied his mind so much with the problems of the strike that he consciously or unconsciously denied his wife her conjugal rights. We are told of a night when his wife kept turning in bed uneasily desiring that he at least embrace her. But Doudou, who was lost in thought, only asked, "Do you want something?" - to which she did not reply (146). Doudou's loyalty to the strikers' cause, illustrated by his refusal to take the attractive 'bribe' and a job promotion offered by Isnard, also shows that he is not interested in individual comfort and riches; he wants rather a collective improvement of the workers' living conditions. He wants the black workers to have the same advantages as the white workers.

Complicit masculinity

Doudou and Bakayoko are exceptional and quite unlike Daouda Beaugosse (a delegate from Dakar) who is more interested in his personal interests. Beaugosse had graduated from a trade school with a diploma as a lathe operator. He was an assistant director of the strike committee in Dakar. He, however, confided in N'Deye Touti (a lady he wished to marry) that he would prefer to go back to work. He says:

> This strike is just damned stupidity. It's been going on for two months now, and we're still right where we were when it started. I told Alioune at the beginning it would never work, but I didn't realize myself… Listen, I read in the paper that there are jobs open as storekeepers, for Africans who know how to read (60).

He justifies his quitting the cause of the strikers by claiming many people had been imprisoned and that they would starve to death. After the fruitless meeting in Thies between the delegates and the French men, Beaugosse went back to Dakar and announced to the other committee members that he had quit. He told them, "I'm leaving, that's all. I have the right to do what I want for myself, don't I?" (208). We see him next at the racecourse meeting in the company of the personnel director, Edouard, and young Pierre as they take their seats in the grandstand.

The other characters that are portrayed as complicit with the French authorities include Hadrame, the owner of the largest shop in the district, El Hadji Mabigue, the chief of the district, and the Imam (spiritual leader). They are not comfortable with the oppositional stance of the strikers. They are depicted as indifferent not only to the struggle and suffering of the workers, but also to their subjugated place in society. In Connell's words, they have "some connection with the hegemonic project but do not embody hegemonic masculinity" (1995:79).

Hadrame, the Moor, asks Ramatoulaye to tell the men to go back to work. He states: "You will all die of hunger. This strike is a war of eggs against stones!" (42). He fears selling his goods on credit to the strikers' families because, if he did, the French authorities would close down his shop. Ramatoulaye leaves, but not before she rebukes him for being on the side of the French.

El Hadji Mabigue too believes in the invincibility of the French. He tells Ramatoulaye that men should accept their subordinate rank since it is ordained by heaven. He says:

> But if the women should refuse to support them [the men], they would soon return to the shops. Do you really think that the *toubabs* will give in? I know better – I know that they will have the last word. Everything belongs to them – the shops, and the merchandise in the shops, even the water we drink. This strike is like a band of monkeys deserting a fertile plain – who gains from that? The owner of the plain! It is not our part in life to resist the will of heaven. 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 (44-45).

Ramatoulaye does not buy his pseudo-religious arguments and accuses him of being "in league" (45) with the French.

The Imam, or "the Serigne N'Dakarou," as they called him, visits the police station, as requested by the chief of police, and addresses a crowd of protesting women surrounding a dead body. He reprimands and blames them for the death. He then dismisses the strikers as instruments of communist infidels. He further tells them:

> God has decided that we live side by side with the French *toubabs*, and the French are teaching us things we have not known and showing us how to make the things we need. It is not up to us to rebel against the will of God, even when the reasons for that will are a mystery to us" (124).

These normally respected leaders are clearly in favor of maintaining the status quo, despite the shortcomings in the system, as it affords them a measure of security.

Cowardly masculinity

We have a subordinate form of masculinity that is hinged upon cowardice. Sounkare, the chief watchman, is a good example. On the first day of the strike, he had fled into hiding when the soldiers shot at the crowd in front of the workshops. He was prepared to remain in a perpetual subordinate position because he believed in the invincibility of the French men. He believed in the futility of the strike and

planned to tease the workers by telling them, “I told you so” (128), when they were forced to come back to work. In his astonishment at the strikers’ audacity, Sounkare tells his fellow old men that striking workers had short memories. Sounkare remembers the strike of 1938 which was squashed at once by the French and in which many workers had died. He reminded Bakary that the French owned everything that moved from Thies to Koulikoro. “Even our lives belong to them,” (18) he added. His fear of what the all-powerful French could do to the striking workers makes him quickly disappear at the approach of the armed soldiers.

Bachirou, one of the office staff, is also branded a ‘coward’ for his selfish stand. Samba N’Doulougou accuses him of discouraging others from striking because he is on the staff, and the idea of any of the rest of them being on it, too, is enough to make him piss in his pants (19). Bachirou defends himself by saying, “But don’t forget about 1938” (19). He also displays his cowardice during the battle between the workers and the soldiers. He flees and meets Dieynaba (a market woman) who asks him, “Where are you going, coward?” (32). She then gives him a stone to throw “but he just stammered something and ran off again” (23). This clearly ‘unmanly’ act is scoffed at, but in his way of thinking, he is being a prudent and ‘wise’ man who has learnt from experience.

Diara, the ticket collector, and four other workers who secretly went back to work, also bear the label of a cowardly masculinity. They had voted for the strike and, like all others, they had received their share of the relief food from the union. However, they sneak back to work, which also suggests their selfishness and dishonesty. To further affirm his inadequate subordinate masculinity, Diara acts

mean by forcing “the wives of the strikers to leave the train whenever they attempted to visit one of the neighboring towns” (81). Four women testify against Diara during the trial. They accuse him of spying on them and asking French soldiers to confiscate their tickets and get them off the trains far from their towns. This too is a form of ‘treacherous’ masculinity, but with no redeeming features.

All workers were obliged to stay away from work (whatever the cost), since they all voted for an unlimited strike. However, Diara and four others sneak back, going back on the strikers’ commitment. The mark of a ‘man’ in the eyes of the community was the extent to which a worker held out despite the starvation, the deprivation, the suffering and the arrests by the police. No wonder, Mame Sofi (first wife of Deune – a guard at the union headquarters) tells her friends, “I told ours the other night, ‘If you go back to work before the others, I’ll cut off the only thing that makes you a man’” (48). Bakary too, who envies the young strikers, reports to the starving Sounkare that the strikers “are fighting like men” (135), implying real men, not spineless ones like him.