The Last of the Empire

A Senegalese novel

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Translated from the French by Adrian Adams

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The Last of the Empire

To my wife from far away
Carrie D. 'Malawi'
To the children
Alioune Alain
Mame Moussa
I dedicate this book that
deprived them for so long
of the all-pervading odour
of my pipe.

Sembene

Author's Foreword

This book is not to be taken for anything other than a work of imagination.

Our dear and beautiful country has borne and bred only men and women worthy of our esteem and entire trust, worthy of the position they occupy even fleetingly.

These men and women of our dear SUNUGAL – Senegal – are far superior to the mediocre types portrayed in this book. I will (never) forgive any reader who makes any comparison, any connection even covert between these 'fictional characters' and our valiant fellow citizens, devoted unto death (however it may strike) to building our future. I will not hesitate to have recourse to our laws (which are fair and just).

Sembene
Galle Ceddo
August 1976 – January 1981

GLOSSARY

Bambara geec Slave from the West Indies.

BCEAO Banque Centrale des Etats d'Afrique de l'Ouest.

Boy-bi Term used to address a junior. (Wolof)

Caaf da Xëm The roasted groundnuts have burnt.

Cëbu Jën Rice with fish.

Couz Short for the French 'cousin'.

Debbo Woman (Pulaar)

Diola A people of the Casamance region in southern Senegal.

Doyen Honorific term denoting the senior member of a group.

Fadjar Early-morning prayers.

FEANF Fédération des Etudians d'Afrique Noire en France.

Geew A circle. Hence *gueewel*, to form a circle about someone; and by association *guewel*, the caste of praise-singers and musicians.

Gran-bi Term used to address an elder. (Wolof)

Guelewar A prince.

Jam u geec Slave from overseas.

Joom Galle The master of the house (Pulaar).

Mawdo Term of address showing respect. (Pulaar)

Ndey San Denotes sorrowful compassion. (Wolof)

OAU Organization of African Unity.

Safara A kind of holy water.

SDEC Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage.

Tirailleurs Sénégalais A corps that included men from all France's colonies in Black Africa.

Tonton A synonym of 'uncle', used to show filial respect for a mentor.

Tubabs bu nuls Black Europeans.

UMOA Union Monétaire Ouest Africaine.

Yenekat Town criers.

CHAPTER 1

Friday, 6.30 a.m.

Gun at hip, his face expressionless, the guard raised his right hand and motioned him to wait, and then moved off on bandy legs down the corridor, silent at this very early hour. A door, which was padded with imitation leather, swallowed him up.

For years now Mam Lat Soukabé, Minister of Finance and the Economy, had walked down this corridor once a week. He knew every door on the way to the chamber where Cabinet meetings were held. Puzzled by the guard's stern demeanour, he wondered why the President of the Republic, Léon Mignane, had summoned him so early. It must be somewhere between 6.15 and 6.25. Less than four hours from now, he was due to sign the official agreement with the International Aid Fund. The text of the agreement had been drawn up under his personal supervision.

Mam Lat Soukabé gazed down the corridor. At the opposite end he glimpsed the shadow of another guard, with a rifle. He began to be obsessed with a possible reversal of fortune. He had a growing sense of unease and insecurity. Why all these armed men? 'If the Venerable One hadn't called for me, I'd get the hell out of here!' No sooner had he thought that, than he started, switched the Samsonite from one hand to the other, and looked the other way. Another guard, with a military bearing, was drawing near.

'Good morning, Minister,' said the man in uniform as he came up to him. The greeting soothed Mam Lat Soukabé. He acknowledged it with a grunt, and breathed more heavily. Following the man's gaze, he saw the first guard returning, accompanied by Corréa, the Minister of the Interior. Relief at the sight of a colleague renewed his self-confidence. He moved quickly towards Corréa.

'Hullo,' he said with alacrity, and added inquiringly: 'What's going on here?'

'Come along,' was Corréa's only reply.

Mam Lat Soukabé was wearing a silky tropical-weight suit purchased on Fifth Avenue in New York, a shirt of India silk, a striped yellow tie, and platform shoes to add to his height. He dyed his hair, coquettishly leaving a few white hairs in his crescent-shaped moustache. No one knew whether he owed his innumerable female conquests to the care he took with his appearance, or to his control of the country's finances.

Five people were already seated in the room. Mam Lat Soukabé let his gaze rest on each in turn: Wade, Minister of Defence; Haïdara, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Doyen Cheikh Tidiane Sall, Minister of Justice; Mapathé, Minister of Information and Parliamentary Affairs; and last, Daouda (David to his friends), the Prime Minister. Their eyes betrayed weariness. They had fallen silent as he came in. On the long table, the ashtrays set in front of the smokers were full to overflowing.

'We looked for you everywhere last night, and couldn't find you. It seems you were at a meeting,' said Daouda, seated in his usual place to the right of the President's empty chair.

'Why are you questioning me?' asked Mam Lat Soukabé aggressively, glaring at the Prime Minister.

'We want to know,' replied the Prime Minister, meaning, 'I want to know.' Raising his voice, he asked again: 'Where did you spend the night?' He added at once, to make the question sound less indiscreet: 'It's very important.'

The rivalry between the two men had split the government, the administration and the ruling party. At every level, each had his followers.

'I was told over the telephone that the President wanted to see me.'

Mam Lat Soukabé was reasserting himself. Prime Minister Daouda had spoken with authority, but it hadn't quite come off.

'Where did I spend the night? Frankly, I'm not going to tell you.'

Still standing, Mam Lat Soukabé eyed the only European present, seated behind Corréa.

'Adolphe, it was you who rang to say the Venerable One wanted to see me; where is he?'

Adolphe remained silent.

The presence of the Minister of Finance and the Economy at this emergency meeting had been felt to be undesirable. Doyen Cheikh Tidiane Sall had been opposed to such ostracism. He had argued: 'Mam Lat is of equal rank to all of us here. To leave him out, to pretend he doesn't exist, would be a mistake even more serious than the object of this meeting.' He was trying to make peace but the trio of Corréa, Wade and the Prime Minister reacted angrily to his words. Usually, the President's presence alone could make the two clans hold their peace. In his absence, the rift between the groups would widen. The battle to succeed him had started well before this particular Friday morning.

'Doyen, can you guarantee that Mam Lat will listen to reason?'

'Since when am I responsible for the behaviour of the Finance Minister?' exclaimed the old man.

Haïdara hesitated to answer. The Minister of Foreign Affairs wanted the transfer of power to take place smoothly. The prospect of a struggle between the two contenders hung like a storm on the horizon.

'No one knows where he is, anyway. They've tried all his women,' said Corrêa, a hint of denigration in his voice.

'I object to this sectarian spirit. As a minister, he enjoys the same prerogatives we do. He always starts work early. We can contact him at his ministry before we leave here.'

Cheikh Tidiane pulled out his pocket-watch, attached to his waistcoat by a chain. To end the argument, he suggested:

'Let us ask Monsieur Adolphe to ring him.'

That is how Monsieur Adolphe – personal adviser to the President of the Republic – came to take the liberty of summoning the minister in the President's name.

'I'm listening, Monsieur Adolphe,' Mam Lat Soukabé said evenly, addressing the European.

'Sit down, Mam,' said Cheikh Tidiane with all the authority he could muster, pulling out a chair.

Mam Lat sat down, his hands on his attaché case.

'Might I know where you spent the night? I don't mean right now; but later.'

The Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke in a comradely tone of voice. He had weak eyes, and wore very dark glasses with thin gold rims. In profile, his flat face and the heavy lenses shielding his eyes gave him the look of a chameleon.

'To you especially, Haïdara, I will say nothing,' stated Mam Lat Soukabé. 'May I, in turn, ask what is going on? Where is the Venerable One?'

No one answered. He turned to his right and asked:

'Doyen, what's happening?'

'Tell me where you spent the night,' urged the old man.

'With a woman, not my wife. I won't say anything more. What's going on?'

Cheikh Tidiane glanced sideways at Daouda.

(It needs to be said that the two men never addressed each other directly, but always through a third person.)

'Mam Lat, we found out last night that Léon has disappeared.'

Being the President's elder, Cheikh Tidiane called him by his first name.

'Doyen . . . you . . .'

He could scarcely finish his sentence. The earth was giving way beneath his feet. He seemed to be floating in space, as if in a nightmare.

'Is he . . .?' he brought out with difficulty.

'No! No! Not dead. At least we hope not. Léon has simply disappeared,' answered the Doyen.

Mam Lat Soukabé's gaze shifted from the Doyen's face to the 'empty throne'. He said:

'It's not the first of April. But it must be a joke!'

Without knowing it, he was repeating what the others had said hours before.

'All the same, it's true; as true as it is that you and I are sitting here now.'

'Doyen, it's not possible! A president can't disappear just like that. The palace is guarded night and day.'

'Who said it happened at the palace?' asked Corrêa quickly, policeman-style.

'Where did it happen, then? Let's stop the joking . . . I'm meant to be signing the IAF agreement this morning.'

'Nobody's joking, Mam Lat. The Venerable One really did disappear last night. We are the only people to have heard the sad news.'

Mam Lat Soukabé remained silent, as if stunned.

The wake-like gloom deepened.

The five of them, and the Prime Minister, were Léon Mignane's right-hand men. Each, within his field, was the President's confidant. His absence hung over them like a damp, numbing pall. Their eyelids were swollen with lack of sleep. They sat with drawn faces and loosened ties, each listening to his beating heart.

'The Venerable One can't have vanished just like that. Ask his adviser . . . Monsieur Adolphe?'

Adolphe, an expatriate, was startled by Mam Lat's remark. Since the start of their conclave, no one had thought, or ventured, to address Monsieur Adolphe. The European felt awkward. Mam Lat's sudden query, and the way everyone looked at him, made him ill at ease. He felt his former authority slipping from his grasp, like an actor who doesn't know his lines well, and is disconcerted by every change of scenery. For the first time in all his decades in the country, he felt like an alien.

In 1950, having successfully completed secondary school, Adolphe joined his country's army. After a few months' initiation at Corniche-Kléber in Strasbourg, he spent some time in occupied Germany – the French zone. He then went to Indo-China. He was noticed, earned honours and was mentioned in dispatches. He was one of the thousands defeated with the French expeditionary force at

Dien Bien Phu. He was deeply wounded by this humiliating major defeat, a blot on the renown of the nation's army. Ruminating thoughts of revenge, he studied at Saint-Maixent and became an officer. His head full of stories of the 'empire-builders', he showed boundless hatred for the politicians who were selling out their colonial inheritance. He soon had his revenge when Charles de Gaulle made the politicos toe the line.

He next turned up in Algeria, as a lieutenant. He roamed the Sahara with the Camel Corps, defending France. He knocked off plenty of *fellagha*. For a soldier defeated in the rice-fields of Indo-China, to fail once more in the Algerian *bled* would be a disaster. He was wont to say, echoing the words of a very famous figure, that 'The Mediterranean flows through France, just as the Seine flows through Paris.'

He threw himself into the action, no holds barred, in the best gunboat tradition, and won his third row of gold braid. Algeria too was lost. After this traumatic blow to his pride, he returned home an embittered man.

With the help of some *esprit de corps*, he was sent to Senegal. No longer in uniform, with no troops to command, he was now special adviser for politico-military affairs to the President of the Republic. With Corréa he formed a group in charge of secret files and covert operations. He was answerable to the President alone, and had private access to the French Embassy. In fact, he had precedence over all current ministers.

'Monsieur Adolphe, you still haven't answered my question,' repeated Mam Lat Soukabé.

In a flash, Adolphe realized that he was no match for the technocrat. Mam Lat's insistence flustered him. He took out a filtertip Gauloise and lit it, before saying:

'I can't answer your question, minister. Let us hope it may turn out to be a practical joke.'

'The Venerable One's doddering now, is he? We have all kinds of police, secret, official, subsecret and God knows what else, and you say . . . perhaps it's a practical joke! What about you, Corréa; where were your police all this time? You owe us an explanation,' thundered Mam Lat Soukabé.

'You turned up last, don't make us repeat everything.'

Annoyed, Corréa had raised his voice. He gazed accusingly at Doyen Cheikh Tidiane: 'What did we tell you? Mam's Lat's being here is making for trouble.'

'I want to know,' snapped back Mam Lat. 'I have the same responsibilities as everyone else here. The President of the Republic disappears, and you want me just to shut up. What were your men doing?'

'Ever since his driver, old Siin, was found dead, we've been checking out the entire Cap-Vert area.'

'So there's a dead body as well,' said Mam Lat, taking over Daouda's role in chairing the discussion.

'Yes.'

'And I thought it happened at the palace!'

'It happened in town, on the Western Corniche,' explained Corréa.

'What the hell was he doing there?'

The question remained unanswered.

Each man had devised his own explanation, but refrained from airing it.

'Let's say it's the Black Squadron gang that did it,' quipped Mam Lat, pleased with his sally. One corner of his mouth lengthened into a wry half-smile, stretching his thick salt-and-pepper moustache.

'What connection can there be between our country and terrorists?' enquired Cheikh Tidiane.

'I don't know,' answered Mam Lat.' 'Maybe the Minister of the Interior can answer that question.'

'What? Every leader of an opposition party, legal or not, is under surveillance. I myself have checked all nationals and foreigners entering and leaving the country. All calls are being tapped. Wires from journalists and press agencies are being discreetly checked, to avoid leaks.'

'Let's say it's the Israelis who've staged a second Entebbe in Dakar.'

'Idi Amin's no longer in office. He's fled . . .'

'And where's our man right now?' challenged Mam Lat sharply, a mocking gleam in his eye.

'What about the Palestinians, then?'

'Might I inquire, Haïdara, what motive the Palestinians might have, in your view, for such action?'

Doyen Cheikh Tidiane Sall had spoken slowly and deliberately, looking Haïdara in the face. Léon Mignane's elder, he was his oldest companion and had witnessed his rise to power. He had often disagreed with the younger man, now also in his seventies. That had several times earned him a reprimand from one or the other of the ministers of the second post-Independence generation. During one session where all the twenty-two ministers and the Venerable One were present, Daouda had exclaimed: 'Doyen, there's no age limit for foolishness. There's no head nor tail to what you're saying.' Africa has lost her respect for elders. It's a mere survival now.

As one meeting followed another, Cheikh Tidiane noted that he had become a target for repeated verbal attacks. Léon Mignane had realized that his age-mate was not immune to well-aimed sarcasm.

As if he himself were neutral, above the fray, he would console him:

'In a democracy, everyone must express his opinions. We must acknowledge, without false shame, that it was the *Tubabs* who taught us modern democracy. Under the palaver tree of the Africa of yore, truth was the monopoly of the elders.'

Cheikh Tidiane had stoically accepted the situation. Since then he had refrained from talking or thinking too much. Week after week his relationship with Léon Mignane had deteriorated. During the weekly meetings they exchanged only a few words, for appearances' sake. He was startled when after a Cabinet meeting Léon came up to him and said with apparent modesty: 'Cheikh, I'd like to consult you about something.' He quickly added: 'If you're free of course. I'll be at the palace on Sunday afternoon.'

That Sunday, after a refreshing nap, Cheikh Tidiane had gone to the palace. Like an elderly couple the two men strolled down to the garden, on the seaward side. On the horizon the smooth liquid azure blended with a cloudless sky. Vultures wheeled overhead. Their shoes crunched on gravel as they walked along the path. The conversation languished. Cheikh Tidiane Sall listened warily, punctuating pauses with a 'Hm! Hm!', while nodding his freshly shaven gleaming black head.

Suddenly, Léon blurted out:

'What if we resumed diplomatic relations with Israel? Sadat is a great African, and he showed courage in signing a peace treaty with the Jews.'

Cheikh Tidiane stopped in his tracks. Three paces ahead, Léon Mignane stood waiting for him. For a short time they stared at each other; then Cheikh Tidiane joined him without speaking, his jacket unbuttoned, his hands clasped behind his back.

'In that part of the world, the political context has changed. The Middle East must know peace at last. The sleep of the just,' added Léon Mignane. From a distance, his gaze was following the armed sentry pacing the low red stone wall reinforced with electric wire.

Cheikh Tidiane eyed the President, struggling to repress the thoughts crowding to his lips, then said:

'Explain yourself, Léon! What context? The Arab countries have broken with Sadat.'

'That's their attitude at the moment. But it's temporary. One has to consider how things will evolve. Some Arab countries will re-establish diplomatic relations with Sadat. We ought to be thinking along those lines . . .'

'All the Arab countries condemned Sadat at the Baghdad con-

ference. Furthermore, the headquarters of the Arab League have been transferred to Tunis. Why do you want to swim against the tide of history?'

From his full height Cheikh Tidiane gazed down upon the other man's dyed hair.

'It's not a question of swimming against the tide, Cheikh. One must face facts. Sadat had the courage to do what he's done. He deserves his Nobel Peace Prize,' said Léon Mignane, scratching his cheek.

'What about the PLO? Explain yourself, Léon! I don't follow you. Who are you trying to whitewash? Sadat? The Hebrew state? Or who else?'

'No! No! It's not a question of whitewashing,' Léon Mignane protested.

He drew in his lower lip, changing the shape of his mouth.

'In that case, Léon, wait for the OAU's decision. And don't forget the aid you've requested from certain Gulf States.'

'What are you getting at, Cheikh?'

'I want to refresh your memory a bit, Léon.'

Despite his self-control, Léon Mignane had been wounded by this remark. He didn't like people to point out his lapses. His grimace deepened into a sneer of contempt.

'If the petro-dollars stop flowing, we'll call on our partners for help.'

'What partners?'

'The Europeans! Have the Arabs broken with the European countries, who have maintained relations with Israel throughout? Why should I be more particular than they are?'

Léon Mignane emphasized the end of his sentence by drawing himself up on tiptoe. He lost his balance, exclaiming 'Oops!', then regained his footing.

A smile lit up Cheikh Tidiane's face. He recalled an article he had read in the European Press: 'Secret meetings are taking place in Black Africa as well as in Europe, in order to convince certain countries to recognize the Jewish State.' Further on, he had read: 'The United States, Great Britain, Canada, France and Federal Germany, along with Israel, would be prepared to compensate for losses caused by the withdrawal of Arab donor nations. By this operation, the "Great Powers" would consolidate the position of Egypt, faced with the hostility of the Muslim world, while helping the Jewish State to break out of isolation.' Cheikh Tidiane no longer doubted the truth of these allegations.

'You're prepared to sacrifice the PLO then, Léon? For what price?'

'Who, me? You know me, Cheikh; I never yield an inch. *Muug!*'

he exclaimed, lifting his head. He thought it wise to add: 'Israel has never demanded that PLO representatives leave Paris, London, Bonn or Rome . . .'

'For the simple reason that Israel has no way of applying pressure to those governments. Furthermore, those countries need petrol . . .'

'I repeat, Cheikh, that no one can apply pressure to me. Neither today nor tomorrow.'

A look of malice appeared on Cheikh Tidiane Sall's elderly countenance. The smile spread as far as his eyes. Léon Mignane detested his companion's superior expression.

'Léon, you won't resist pressure from the West. I know you too well. The West has more influence over you than over any other present-day Head of State on its periphery.'

Léon Mignane was disappointed. He regretted having asked Cheikh to come. He recalled the times Cheikh had directly opposed him: he had been against buying a Boeing, against his seventieth birthday celebrations; he had refused to come to the airport to welcome him home; he had been against sending a contingent of troops to Shaba (Zaïre). Like an elderly couple accustomed to living with each other, they hesitated to part. Léon Mignane was afraid of being forsaken, But he was vexed, and struck back:

'We were having a friendly chat, and now you've offended me. You seem more and more lacking in self-control. In Africa, old age usually brings wisdom.'

'Léon, age and experience afford me the privilege of not beating round the bush when I want to tell a friend the truth. All the more so when I've been asked for my opinion. At the moment, I'm not addressing the Head of State. Forget your act and be frank with me. Why are you in such a hurry to renew diplomatic relations with Israel?'

'No one's manipulating me. Do you think I'm keeping something from you?'

'Yes, Léon! Yes.'

It was a direct hit.

They walked on in silence, side by side. A pair of cranes stalked down the grassy slope, moving from the shadow of the building into the sunshine.

Léon Mignane's face crumpled with disappointment. Twisting his fingers, he finally said:

'We'll continue this conversation some other time, Cheikh.'

'I don't think there's any point in it, Léon,' said Cheikh Tidiane. He felt sorry for his old friend.

The Doyen stared at Daouda, then at Corrêa. Did they know that