1923–

"You are aspiring to be a writer? You will never be a good one so long as you don't defend a cause." So wrote Ousmane Sembène (sem be' nà) in his first novel, Le Docker noir (The Black Dock Worker, 1956). The words are uttered by a fictional character, but they also voice Sembène's own philosophy as a writer. His works reveal an intense commitment to political and social change.

Ousmane Sembène was born in Ziguinchor, Senegal, in 1923. Expelled from school at the age of fourteen, he worked as a fisherman, a plumber, a bricklayer, and an apprentice mechanic before serving with the French army in Europe during World War II. After the war Sembène returned briefly to Senegal, where he joined African railway workers in a strike for better wages and working conditions. His experiences with the striking workers contributed to his growing political consciousness.

He returned to France as a stowaway on a ship and found a job as a dockworker in Marseilles. Eventually, he became a trade union leader and joined the French Communist party. He also taught himself to read and write in French and began writing his first novel.

Sembène's early works included the semi-autobiographical Le Docker noir, followed by O Pays mon beau peuple! (O My Country, My Beautiful People, 1957), and Les Bouts de bois de Dieu (God's Bits of Wood, 1960), which many consider his masterpiece. In these and subsequent novels, Sembène tries to awaken the consciousness of his people to a wide array of social problems. Les Bouts, for example, is a call to action against colonialist oppression. Through its striking and dynamic female characters, Les Bouts also addresses sexism in African society. Le Docker noir is a searing exposé of political corruption. O Pays explores the conflict between tradition and modernism in African society.

In the preface to his novel L'Harmattan (The Storm, 1964), Sembène compares himself to the traditional African griot. A griot was a professional storyteller who kept the people's history alive by narrating tales from the past. According to Sembène, the griot was also the "witness" of every event. It was he who captured, and laid out before everyone under the tree of talk the deeds and mannerisms of each." In much the same way, Sembène aims to "capture and lay out," to expose, the evils that weigh down modern African society.

In the early 1960's Sembène took up filmmaking, hoping to reach an even wider audience than he was able to reach in print. (See the feature on Sembène as filmmaker, page 1402.) His films reflect the same social and political concerns as his books. His prize-winning film Mandabi (The Money Order, 1968), based on his short novel of the same name, established Sembène's international reputation as a filmmaker. Since then, he has continued in his role as observer, critic, and chronicler of African society, producing novels and films despite censorship by the Senegalese government.

"Tribal Scars" comes from an early short-story collection, Voltaire (1962). It is a tale of oppression and resistance, of fear and courage. Like a modern-day griot, Sembène tells a tale from out of Africa's past—a tale that has a meaning and relevance for contemporary society.
Tribal Scars

Historical Context. Do you think you would speak, think, and act exactly as you do if you had lived during the Civil War?—probably not. Your attitudes and actions would be affected by the events and customs of the period. Just like real people, fictional characters generally act and think in ways that are consistent with the time in which they live.

The historical events, traditions, and practices that furnish the background (though not necessarily the setting) for a work of fiction provide a historical context. Knowing the historical context of a work contributes to the reader’s understanding of the plot, the characters’ attitudes, actions, and motives, and the theme of the work.

Ousmane Sembène’s “Tribal Scars” takes place approximately two hundred years ago on the West African coast—an area infamous for the bloody and violent raids that provided human “merchandise” for the slave trade. Initiated in the early seventeenth century by white Europeans, the slave trade grew to mammoth proportions as the demand for cheap labor in the Americas intensified.

The slave trade was a system of interdependent parts—links in a chain of greed, persecution, oppression, and terror. The captains of the slave ships often became quite wealthy transporting their human cargo from Africa to the Americas. The white slave traders in the Americas took the Africans off the ships and sold them to the highest bidder, often tearing families apart in order to make the highest possible profit. The white slave owners created the tremendous demand for black labor; they constantly needed to replace slaves that had been shot, beaten, or worked to death. The slave hunters, usually Africans, raided villages up and down the African coast, terrorizing, capturing, and selling their fellow Africans. The white traders functioned as middlemen between the African slave hunters and the captains of the slave ships.

“Tribal Scars” relates the experiences of one West African family caught in the nightmare of the slave trade. Knowing the historical context helps us to understand the symbolism of the scars, and the conflict created when Amoo, the protagonist, must make a distinction between surviving and living.

Writing

The protagonist of Sembène’s story makes a difficult choice. Think about choices you have made in your life or choices made by the characters in your favorite movie or book. List some of the choices that come to mind. Which were easy decisions and which were difficult? In many choices, something is gained and something is let go. What was gained in each choice on your list and what was let go?
Tribal Scars or The Voltaïque

Ousmane Sembène
translated by Len Ortzen

In the evenings we all go to Mane’s place, where we drink mint tea and discuss all sorts of subjects, even though we know very little about them. But recently we neglected the major problems such as the ex-Belgian Congo, the trouble in the Mali Federation, the Algerian War and the next UNO meeting—even women, a subject which normally takes up about a quarter of our time. The reason was that Saer, who is usually so stolid and serious, had raised the question, “Why do we have tribal scars?”

(If should add that Saer is half Voltaïque, half Senegales; but he has no tribal scars.)

Although not all of us have such scars on our faces, I have never heard such an impassioned discussion, such a torrent of words, in all the time we have been meeting together at Mane’s. To hear us, anyone would have thought that the future of the whole continent of Africa was at stake. Every evening for weeks the most fantastic and unexpected explanations were put forward. Some of us went to neighboring villages and even farther afield to consult the elders and the griots,1 who are known as the “encyclopedias” of the region, in an endeavor to plumb the depths of this mystery, which seemed buried in the distant past.

Saer was able to prove that all the explanations were wrong.

Someone said vehemently that “it was a mark of nobility”; another that “it was a sign of bondage.” A third declared that “It was decorative—there was a tribe which would not accept a man or a woman unless they had these distinctive marks on the face and body.” One joker told us with a straight face that: “Once upon a time, a rich African chief sent his son to be educated in Europe. The chief’s son was a child when he went away, and when he returned he was a man. So he was educated, an intellectual, let us say. He looked down on the tribal traditions and customs. His father was annoyed by this, and wondered how to bring him back into the royal fold. He consulted his chief counselor. And one morning, out on the square and in front of the people, the son’s face was marked with cuts.”

No one believed that story, and the teller was reluctantly obliged to abandon it.

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1. Voltaïque (val'të-k): A person from Upper Volta—present-day Burkina Faso in western Africa.
2. ex-Belgian Congo...UNO meeting: The first three were political topics that concerned Africans at the time this story was written. UNO stands for United Nations Organization, now simply called the United Nations.
3. half Voltaïque...Senegales: Descended from the west-African peoples of the former Upper Volta and Senegal.
4. griots ( gri-ō') n.: Storytellers, respected as the guardians of tradition and culture.
Someone else said: “I went to the French Institute and hunted around in books, but found nothing. However, I learned that the wives of the gentlemen in high places are having these marks removed from their faces; they go to Europe to consult beauticians. For the new rules for African beauty disdain the old standards of the country; the women are becoming Americanized. . . . And as the trend develops, tribal scars lose their meaning and importance and are bound to disappear.”

We talked about their diversity, too; about the variety even within one tribe. Cuts were made on the body as well as on the face. This led someone to ask: “If these tribal scars were signs of nobility, or of high or low caste, why aren’t they ever seen in the Americas?”

“Ah, we’re getting somewhere at last!” exclaimed Saer, who obviously knew the right answer to his original question, or thought he did.

“Tell us then. We give up,” we all cried.

“All right,” said Saer. He waited while the man on duty brought in glasses of hot tea and passed them round. The room became filled with the aroma of mint.

“So we’ve got around to the Americas,” Saer began. “Now, none of the authoritative writers on slavery and the slave trade has ever mentioned tribal scars, so far as I know. In South America, where fetishism and witchcraft as practiced by slaves still survive to this day, no tribal scars have ever been seen. Neither do Negroes living in the Caribbean have them, nor in Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic nor anywhere else. So we come back to Black Africa before the slave trade, to the time of the old Ghana Empire, the Mali and the Gao empires, and the cities and kingdoms of the Hausa, Bouloumou, Benin, Mossi and so on. Now, not one of the travelers who visited those places and wrote about them mentions this practice of tribal scars. So where did it originate?”

By now everyone had stopped sipping hot tea; they were all listening attentively.

“If we study the history of the slave trade objectively we find that the dealers sought blacks who were strong and healthy and without blemish. We find too, among other things, that in the markets here in Africa and on arrival overseas the slave was inspected, weighed and evaluated like an animal. No one was inclined to buy merchandise which had any blemish or imperfection, apart from a small mark which was the stamp of the slave-trader; but nothing else was tolerated on the body of the beast. For there was also the preparation of the slave for the auction market; he was washed and polished—whitened, as they said then—which raised the price. How, then, did these scars originate?”

We could find no answer. His historical survey had deepened the mystery for us.

“Go on, Saer, you tell us,” we said, more eager than ever to hear his story of the origin of tribal scars.

And this is what he told us:

The slave-ship African had been anchored in the bay for days, waiting for a full load before sailing for the Slave States. There were already more than fifty black men and thirty Negro women down in the hold. The captain’s agents were scouring the country for supplies. On this particular day only a few of the crew were on board; with the captain and the doctor, they were all in the latter’s cabin. Their conversation could be heard on deck.

Amoo bent lower and glanced back at the men who were following him. He was a strong, vigorous man with rippling muscles, fit for any manual work. He gripped his ax firmly in one hand and felt his long cutlass with the other, then crept stealthily forward. More armed men dropped lithely over the bulwarks, one after the other. Momutu, their leader, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a blue uniform with red facings, and high black boots, signaled with his musket to surround the galley. The ship’s cooper had appeared from nowhere and tried to escape by jumping into the sea. But the blacks who

5. caste: In some cultures the social class that is determined by birth and defines one’s lifelong place in society.

6. cutlass (kut’ las) n.: A short, thick, curving sword.

7. bulwarks (boul’ warks) n.: The parts of a ship’s side that extend above the deck, forming a wall around it.
had remained in the canoes seized him and speared him to death.

Fighting had broken out aboard the *African*. One of the crew tried to get to close quarters with the leading attackers and was struck down. The captain and the remaining men shut themselves in the doctor’s cabin. Mommutu and his band, armed with muskets and cutlasses, besieged the cabin, firing at it now and again. Meanwhile the vessel was being looted. As the shots rang out, the attackers increased in number; canoes left the shore, glided across the water to the *African*, and returned laden with goods.

Mommutu called his lieutenants to him—four big fellows armed to the teeth. “Start freeing the prisoners and get them out of the hold.”

“What about him?” asked his second-in-command, nodding towards Amoo who was standing near the hatchway.

“We’ll see about him later,” replied Mommutu. “He’s looking for his daughter. Get the hold open—and don’t give any arms to the local men. Take the lot!”

The air was heavy with the smell of powder and sweat. Amoo was already battering away at the hatch-covers, and eventually they were broken open with axes and a ram.

Down in the stinking hold the men lay chained together by their ankles. As soon as they had heard the firing they had begun shouting partly with joy, partly from fright. From between-decks, where the women were, came terrified cries. Among all this din, Amoo could make out his daughter’s voice. Sweat pouring from him, he hacked at the panels with all his strength.

“Hey, brother, over here!” a man called to him. “You’re in a hurry to find your daughter?”

“Yes,” he answered, his eyes glittering with impatience.

After many hours of hard work the hold was wide open and Mommutu’s men had brought up the captives and lined them up on deck, where the ship’s cargo for barter had been gathered together: barrels of spirits, boxes of knives, crates containing glassware, silks, parasols and cloth. Amoo had found his daughter, Iome, and the two were standing a little apart from the rest. Amoo knew very well that Mommutu had rescued the captives only in order to sell them again. It was he who had lured the *African*’s captain into the bay.

“Now we’re going ashore,” Mommutu told them. “I warn you that you are my prisoners. If anyone tries to escape or to kill himself, I’ll take the man next in the line and cut him to pieces.”

The sun was sinking towards the horizon and the bay had become a silvery, shimmering sheet of water; the line of trees along the shore stood out darkly. Mommutu’s men began to put the booty into canoes and take it ashore. Mommutu, as undisputed leader, directed operations and gave orders. Some of his men still stood on guard outside the cabin, reminding those inside of their presence by discharging their muskets at the door every few minutes. When the ship had been cleared, Mommutu lit a long fuse that ran to two kegs of gunpowder. The captain, finding that all was quiet, started to make his way up top; as he reached the deck, a ball from a musket hit him full in the chest. The last canoes pulled away from the ship, and when they were half-way to the shore the explosions began; then the *African* blew up and sank.

By the time everything had been taken ashore it was quite dark. The prisoners were herded together and a guard set over them, although their hands and feet were still tied. Throughout the night their whisperings and sobs could be heard, punctuated now and then by the sharp crack of a whip. Some distance away, Mommutu and his aides were reckoning up their haul, drinking quantities of spirits under the starry sky as they found how well they had done for themselves.

Mommutu sent for Amoo to join them.

“You’ll have a drink with us, won’t you?” said Mommutu when Amoo approached with his sleeping daughter on his back (but they only appeared as dim shadows).

“I must be going. I live a long way off and the coast isn’t a safe place now. I’ve been working for you for two months,” said Amoo, refusing a drink.

“Is it true that you killed your wife rather than let her be taken prisoner by slave-traders?” asked one of the men, reeking of alcohol.
“Ahan!”

“And you’ve risked your life more than once to save your daughter?”

“She’s my daughter! I’ve seen all my family sold into slavery one after another, and taken away into the unknown. I’ve grown up with fear, fleeing with my tribe so as not to be made a slave. In my tribe there are no slaves, we’re all equal.”

“That’s because you don’t live on the coast,” put in a man, which made Momutu roar with laughter. “Go on, have a drink! You’re a great fighter. I saw how you cut down that sailor. You’re good with an ax.”

“Stay with me. You’re tough and you know what you want,” said Momutu, passing the keg of spirits to him. Amoo politely declined a drink. “This is our work,” Momutu went on. “We scour the grasslands, take prisoners and sell them to the whites. Some captains know me, but I entice others to this bay and some of my men lure the crew off the ship. Then we loot the ship and get the prisoners back again. We kill any whites left on board. It’s easy work, and we win all round. I’ve given you back your daughter. She’s a fine piece and worth several iron bars.”

(Until the seventeenth century on the west coast of Africa slaves were paid for with strings of cowries as well as with cheap goods; later, iron bars took the place of cowries. It is known that elsewhere in other markets iron bars have always been the medium of exchange.)

“It’s true that I’ve killed men,” said Amoo, “but never to take prisoners and sell them as slaves. That’s your work, but it isn’t mine. I want to get back to my village.”

“He’s an odd fellow. He thinks of nothing but his village, his wife and his daughter.”

Amoo could only see the whites of their eyes. He knew that these men would not think twice of seizing himself and his daughter and selling them to the first slave-trader encountered. He was not made in their evil mold.

“I wanted to set off tonight.”

“No,” snapped Momutu. The alcohol was beginning to take effect, but he controlled himself and softened his voice. “We’ll be in another fight soon. Some of my men have gone with the remaining whites to collect prisoners. We must capture them. Then you’ll be free to go.”

9. cowries (kou’ réz) n.: Brightly colored, glossy shells, formerly used as currency in parts of Africa and Asia.
“I’m going to get her to lie down and have some sleep. She’s had a bad time,” said Amoo, moving away with his daughter.

“Has she had something to eat?”

“We’ve both cared well. I’ll be awake early.”

The two disappeared into the night; but a shadowy figure followed them.

“He’s a fine, strong fellow. Worth four legs.”

“More than that,” added another. “He’d fetch several iron bars and some other stuff as well.”

“Don’t rush it! After the fight tomorrow we’ll seize him and his daughter too. She’s worth a good bit. We mustn’t let them get away. There aren’t many of that kind to be found along the coast now.”

A soothing coolness was coming in from the sea. Night pressed close, under a starry sky. Now and then a scream of pain rose sharply, followed by another crack of the whip. Amoo had settled down with Iome some distance away from the others. His eyes were alert, though his face looked sleepy. During the dozen fights he had taken part in to redeem his daughter, Momutu had been able to judge his qualities, his great strength and suppleness; three times three moons ago, slave-hunters had RAIDed Amoo’s village and carried off all the able-bodied people; he had escaped their clutches because that day he had been out in the bush. His mother-in-law, who had been spurned because of her elephantiasis, had told him the whole story.

When he had recovered his daughter from the slave-ship, his tears had flowed freely. Firmly holding the girl’s wrist and clutching the bloodstained ax in his other hand, his heart had beat fast. Iome, who was nine or ten years old, had wept too.

He had tried to soothe away her fears. “We’re going back to the village. You mustn’t cry, but you must do what I tell you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, father.”

“Don’t cry any more. It’s all over now! I’m here with you.”

And there in the cradle of the night, Iome lay asleep with her head on her father’s thigh. Amoo unsheathed his ax and placed it close at hand. Sitting with his back against a tree, his whole attention was concentrated on the immediate surroundings. At the slightest rustle, his hand went out to grasp his weapon. He dozed a little from time to time.

Even before a wan gleam had lighted the cast, Momutu roused his men. Some of them were ordered to take the prisoners and the loot to a safe place. Amoo and Iome kept out of the way. The girl had deep-set eyes and was tall for her age; her hair was parted in the middle and drawn into two plaits which hung down on her shoulders. She clung to her father’s side; she had seen her former companions from the slave-ship, and although she may not have known the fate in store for them, the sound of the whips left her in no doubt as to their present state.

“They’ll wait for us farther on,” said Momutu, coming across to Amoo. “We mustn’t let ourselves be surprised by the whites’ scouting party. Why are you keeping your child with you? You could have left her with one of my men.”

“I’d rather keep her with me. She’s very frightened,” answered Amoo, watching the prisoners and escort moving off.

“She’s a beautiful girl.”

“Yes.”

“As beautiful as her mother?”

“No.”

Momutu turned away and got the rest of his men, about thirty, on the move. They marched in single column. Momutu was well known among slave-traders, and none of them trusted him. He had previously acted as an agent for some of the traders, then had become a “master of language” (interpreter), moving between the forts and camps where the captured Negroes were held.

They marched all that morning, with Amoo and his daughter following in the rear. When Iome was tired, her father carried her on his back. He was well aware that a watch was being kept on him. The men ahead of him were coarse, sorry-looking creatures; they looked ridiculous, trailing their long muskets. They began to leave the grasslands behind and soon were among tall trees where flocks of vultures perched. No one spoke. All that could be

10. elephantiasis (əˈfələntəˈēzəs) n.: A disease that causes the enlargement of certain body parts, especially the legs.
heard was the chattering of birds and now and again a distant, echoing howling. Then they reached the forest, humid and hostile, and Momutu called a halt; he dispersed his men and told them to rest.

"Are you tired, brother?" one of them asked Amoo. "And what about her?"

Amoo raised her thick-lashed eyes towards the man, then looked at her father.

"She's a bit tired," said Amoo, looking round for a resting-place. He saw a fallen trunk at the foot of a tree and took Amoo to it. The man set to keep watch on them remained a little distance away.

Momutu had a few sweet potatoes distributed to the men, and when this meager meal was over he went to see Amoo.

"How's your daughter?"

"She's asleep," said Amoo, who was carving a doll out of a piece of wood.

"She's a strong girl," said Momutu, sitting down beside him and taking off his broad-brimmed hat. His big black boots were still muddy.

"We'll have a rest and wait for them here. They're bound to come this way."

Amoo was more and more on his guard. He nodded, but kept his eyes on Amoo in between working at the piece of wood, which was gradually taking shape.

"After that you'll be free to go. Do you really want to go back to your village?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't anybody left there," said Momutu, and without waiting for Amoo to reply went on, "I once had a village, too, on the edge of a forest. My mother and father lived there, many relatives—a whole clan! We had meat to eat and sometimes fish. But over the years, the village declined. There was no end to lamentations. Ever since I was born I had heard nothing but screams, seen mad flights into the bush or the forest. You go into the forest, and you die from some disease; you stay in the open, and you're captured to be sold into slavery. What was I to do? Well, I made my choice. I'd rather be with the hunters than the hunted."

Amoo, too, knew that such was life. You were never safe, never sure of seeing the next day dawn. But what he did not understand was the use made of the men and women who were taken away. It was said that the whites used their skins for making boots.

They talked for a long time, or rather Momutu talked without stopping. He boasted of his exploits and his drinking bouts. As Amoo listened, he became more and more puzzled about Momutu's character. He was like some petty warlord, wielding power by force and constraint. Eventually, after what seemed a very long time to Amoo, a man came to warn the chief that the whites were approaching. Momutu gave his orders—kill them all, and hold their prisoners. In an instant the forest fell silent; only the neutral voice of the wind could be heard.

The long file of black prisoners came into view, led by four Europeans each armed with two pistols and a culverin. The prisoners, men and women, were joined together by a wooden yoke bolted round the neck and attached to the man in front and the one behind. Three more Europeans brought up the rear, and a fourth, probably ill, was being carried in a litter by four natives.

A sudden burst of firing from up in the trees echoed long and far. This was followed by screams and confused fighting. Amoo took advantage to fell the man guarding him and, taking his daughter by the hand, slipped away into the forest.

They crossed streams and rivers, penetrating ever deeper into the forest but heading always to the south-east. Amoo's knife and ax had never been so useful as during this time. They traveled chiefly at night, never in broad daylight, avoiding all human contact.

Three weeks later they arrived at the village—about thirty huts huddled together between the bush and the source of a river. There were few inhabitants about at that hour of the day; besides, having been frequently drained of its virile members, the village was sparsely populated. When

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11. culverin (kal' var in) n.: A long-barreled gun used by soldiers before the invention of the rifle.
12. litter (lit' ar) n.: A stretcher for carrying the sick or wounded.
Amoo and Iome reached the threshold of his mother-in-law's hut, the old woman limped out and her cries drew other people, many of them feeble. They were terrified at first, but stood uttering exclamations of joy and surprise when they saw Amoo and Iome. Tears and questions mingled as they crowded round. Iome's grandmother gathered her up and took her into the hut like a most precious possession, and the girl replied to her questions between floods of tears.

The elders sent for Amoo to have a talk and tell them of his adventures.

“All my life, and since before my father's life,” said one of the oldest present, “the whole country has lived in the fear of being captured and sold to the whites. The whites are barbarians.”

“Will it ever end?” queried another. “I have seen all my children carried off, and I can't remember how many times we have moved the village. We can't go any farther into the forest... there are the wild beasts, diseases...”

“I'd rather face wild beasts than slave hunters,” said a third man. “Five or six rains ago, we felt safe here. But we aren't any longer. There's a slave camp only three-and-a-half days' march from the village.”

They fell silent; their wrinkled, worn and worried faces bore the mark of their epoch. They discussed the necessity to move once again. Some were in favor, others pointed out the danger of living in the heart of the forest without water, the lack of strong men, and the family graves that would have to be abandoned. The patriarch, who had the flat head and thick neck of a degenerate,14 proposed that they should spend the winter where they were but send a group to seek another suitable site. It would be sheer madness to leave without having first discovered and prepared a place to go to. There were also the customary sacrifices to be made. Finally, all the men agreed on this course of action. During the short time they would remain there, they would increase cultivation and hold all the cattle in common, keeping the herd in an enclosure. The patriarch was of the opinion that the old women could be used to keep a watch on the village.

13. epoch (ep' ōk) n.: A period of time marked by noteworthy events.
14. patriarch (pā' trē ark) ... degenerate (dē' jen' ĕr it): The leader of the village showed signs of physical abnormality.
The return of Amoo and Iome had put new life into them. They started working communally, clearing and weeding the ground and mending the fences. The men set off for work together and returned together. The women busied themselves too; some did the cooking while others kept a look-out for any surprise visit by “procurers.” (Procurers were native agents, recognizable by their uniform in the colors of the nation they worked for; they were commonly called “slave-hunters.”) No one looked in the direction of the sea without a feeling of apprehension.

The rains came, and the fertile, bountiful earth gave life to the seeds that had been sown. Although the villagers went about their work with no visible sign of worry or fear, they were always on the alert for an attack, knowing it was bound to come sooner or later.

Amoo shared his hut with Iome and always slept with a weapon close at hand. Even a harmless gust of wind sent the girl into a panic. Amoo put his whole heart into his work; Iome, by general agreement, was allowed to rest as much as possible, and she gradually recovered from her ordeal.

Days and weeks slipped by peacefully. The narrow, cultivated strips of land, wrenched from the grip of nature after long struggles, were giving promise of a good harvest. The cassava plants were in bud; the people were beginning to get in stocks of palm-oil, butter, beans and honey, in fact everything they would need in the new village. The prospecting party returned, having discovered an excellent site at the foot of the mountains but above the grasslands, and not far from a running stream. The soil was good, there was plenty of pasture, and the children would be safe from the “procurers.”

Everyone was very pleased with the prospect. The patriarch named the day for departure, and the feeling of safety in the near future led to a relaxation of precautions. Fires, previously forbidden during the hours of darkness for fear of betraying the village, now glowed at night; laughter rang out, and children dared to wander out of sight of their parents, for the adults were thinking only of the departure. They could count the days now. In the council hut there were discussions on which was the favorable sign for the move. Each and everyone was attending to the household gods, the totems and the family graves.

Yet it was not a sacred day, but one like any other. The sun was shining brightly, the tender green leaves of the trees were rustling in the wind, the clouds frolicked in the sky, the humming-birds were gaily seeking food, and the monkeys especially were gamboling in the trees. The whole village was enjoying this glorious day, the kind that can tempt a traveler to stay awhile, a long while.

And it happened on that particular day! On that day the “procurers” suddenly appeared. The frightened animals instinctively fled madly into the forest; men, women and children gave terrified screams on hearing the firing and scattered in panic, having but one thought, to flee to the only retreat open to them—the forest.

Amoo, grasping his ax, pushed Iome and her grandmother before him. But the old, handicapped woman could make only slow progress. They had fled between the huts and the enclosure and gained the edge of the village, and then Amoo had come face to face with one of Momutu’s lieutenants. Amoo was the quicker, and struck him down. But now a whole pack was in pursuit.

Amoo went deeper into the forest, where the thick undergrowth and overhanging branches made progress even slower. Still, if Amoo had been alone, he could have escaped. But he could not abandon his child. He thought of his wife. He had killed her so that she should not be taken. His mother-in-law reminded him of his wife. To abandon the old woman would be abandoning his wife. Time and again, the old woman stopped to get her breath; her thick leg was becoming ever weightier to drag along. Amoo helped her as best he could, while Iome stuck to his side, not saying a word.

An idea came to Amoo. He stopped, took Iome gently by the chin and gazed at her for a long time, for what seemed an eternity. His eyes filled with tears.

15. totems (tō'tomz) n.: Images of animals or natural objects that are regarded as the ancestors of a group.
“Mother,” he said, “we can’t go any farther. Ahead, there’s death for all three of us. Behind, there’s slavery for Iome and me.”

“I can’t go a step farther,” said the old woman, taking her granddaughter by the hand. She raised a distraught face to Amoo.

“Mother, Iome can escape them. You both can. Your skin is no longer any use, the whites can’t make boots with it.”

“But if Iome’s left alone, she’ll die. And what about you?”

“You go free. What happens to me is my affair.”

“You’re not going to kill us?” exclaimed the woman.

“No, mother. But I know what to do so that Iome stays free. I must do it quickly. They’re getting near, I can hear their voices.”

A thunderbolt seemed to burst in his head and the ground to slip away from him. He took a grip on himself, seized his knife and went to a particular bush (the Wolof call it Bantamare; its leaves have antiseptic properties), wrenched off a handful of the large leaves and returned to the other two, who had been watching him wonderingly.

His eyes blurred with tears as he looked at his daughter. “You mustn’t be afraid, Iome.”

“You’re not going to kill her as you did her mother?” exclaimed his mother-in-law again.

“No. Iome, this is going to hurt, but you’ll never be a slave. Do you understand?”

The child’s only answer was to stare at the blade of the knife. She remembered the slave-ship and the blood-stained ax.

Swiftly, Amoo gripped the girl between his strong legs and began making cuts all over her body. The child’s cries rang through the forest; she screamed till she had no voice left. Amoo just had time to finish before the slave-hunters seized him. He had wrapped the leaves all round the girl. With the other captured villagers, Amoo was taken down to the coast. Iome returned to the village with her grandmother, and thanks to the old woman’s knowledge of herbs Iome’s body soon healed; but she still bore the scars.

Months later, the slave-hunters returned to the village; they captured Iome but let her go again. She was worth nothing, because of the blemishes on her body.

The news spread for leagues around. People came from the remotest villages to consult the grandmother. And over the years and the centuries a diversity of scars appeared on the bodies of our ancestors.

And that is how our ancestors came to have tribal scars. They refused to be slaves.

**Reader’s Response** Do you agree or disagree with Amoo’s decision to kill his wife and disfigure Iome rather than let them be captured by the slave hunters? Explain.
THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

1. Why won't Amoo drink with Momutu after freeing lome from the slave ship?
2. Why does Amoo keep his daughter with him constantly while they are with the slave traders?
3. (a) How do you think Amoo's actions come in conflict with his personality? (b) Identify specific instances that illustrate the conflict.
4. (a) Did Amoo love his wife? (b) How do you know?
5. At the end of the story, which characters do you think are "living" and which are "surviving"? Explain.
6. (a) What do the tribal scars represent for Saer? (b) How do you think he feels about people having them removed? Explain.

Applying

7. Why do you think Saer researched the history of tribal scars and shared it with his companions?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Historical Context

Context is the whole situation or set of circumstances relevant to a particular person, thing, or event. In literature, one type of context is historical context, that is, the historical period and events that provide the background for a story or novel. Familiarity with the historical context of a piece enriches our understanding of the characters, their motivations, and even elements of the plot.

In "Tribal Scars," the narrator, Saer, hints at the historical context of the story he is about to tell. The context is confirmed when he begins his story by stating that there were “more than fifty black men and thirty Negro women down in the hold” of the slave ship African. We know right away that the story takes place in the historical context of the slave trade. The more we know about the horrors of the slave trade, the easier it is for us to understand why a whole village of people might be willing to leave their homes to escape the procurers. It might even give us some insight into why some Africans chose to join forces with the slave traders to avoid being forced into slavery themselves.

1. How is the story affected by the fact that slave traders wanted “perfect specimens”?
2. Describe the effects of the slave trade on West African village life.
3. Did this story give you a different perspective on the slave trade? Explain.

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Examining Conflict

Any struggle between opposing forces is a conflict. Conflict can take many forms. It can range from a boxing match to full-scale warfare, from a family quarrel to a presidential debate. Some of the most difficult conflicts, however, take place not in public, but in our hearts and minds. One type of internal conflict, and one of the hardest to resolve, is prompted by a dilemma—a situation that forces a choice between two unpleasant options. Commonly referred to as choosing between the lesser of two evils, resolving a dilemma can be a gut-wrenching experience. In "Tribal Scars," Amoo must choose between working with Momutu or losing his daughter to slavery. Although he chooses to work with Momutu and save lome, it must have been very painful for Amoo to participate in the recapturing of fellow Africans.

1. How does Amoo deal with the conflict between his peaceful nature and the violence required to free his daughter?
2. (a) What dilemma does the slave trade force upon the villagers? (b) How has Momutu resolved this dilemma for himself?
3. What do you think is the most difficult aspect of Amoo’s dilemma at the end of the story? Explain.

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing About a Difficult Decision

Difficult decisions lead us to examine our attitudes, our values, and our convictions. Sometimes, in making such a decision, we recognize the importance of something we had been taking for granted. Think about decisions that you have made, or decisions made by characters in books, movies, or television programs. You might want to review the list you made before you read "Tribal Scars."

Choose a decision made by you or by a fictional character. Write an essay, either as yourself or as a character, explaining the choices you faced, the reasons for your decision, and what you learned in making that decision.

When you revise your essay, make sure that each of your paragraphs expresses and supports a central idea. Revise any paragraphs that contain sentences unrelated to the central thought.