

// ARTÍCULO

# **Staging Masculinity: The Impact of Ancestral and Colonial Legacies in Gender Relations and Social Transformation Through Sembene Ousmane's Cinematic Debut (1960-1965)**

*Puesta en escena de la masculinidad: el impacto de los legados ancestrales y coloniales en las relaciones de género y la transformación social a través del estreno cinematográfico de Sembene Ousmane (1960-1965)*

Recibido: 14 de octubre de 2023  
Solicitud de modificaciones: 6 de noviembre de 2023  
Aceptado: 11 de diciembre de 2023

Saiba Bayo

Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona  
[saiba.bayo@upf.edu](mailto:saiba.bayo@upf.edu)

## Abstract

This article studies the debut of Sembene Ousmane's cinematic narrative during the early years of Senegal's independence. Sembene was a renowned anti-colonial Senegalese writer who shifted to filmmaking during the "independence interlude", from 1960 to 1965, with his first film *Borom Sarret* (1963), he became a pioneer of African cinema. Sembene's revolutionary filmmaking and radical artistic project catapulted him to the realm of world cinema. Drawing on postcolonial film criticism, this article focuses on two of Sembene's pioneering films: *Borom Sarret* and *Niaye*. I argue that he strategically crafted these films to genuinely contribute to the collective effort of postcolonial reconstruction. I start with a brief review of Sembene's literary works during the independence interlude to understand how this period influenced his artistic perspective and cinematic narrative regarding gender. I then delve into an analysis of masculinity and colonial legacy in *Borom Sarret*, and finally focus on *Niaye* to explore how the filmmaker depicts collective memory and patriarchal dynamics in a pseudo-feudal society in transition from colonialism to independence, from tradition to modernity. This article contributes to a better understanding of how Sembene approached social transformation, navigated (post)colonial power structures shaped by colonial and ancestral legacies, and established himself as an iconoclastic artist.

**Keywords:** masculinity, postcolonialism, film studies, social transformation, Sembene Ousmane.

## Resumen

*Este artículo estudia la génesis del cine de Sembene Ousmane durante los primeros años de la independencia de Senegal. Sembene fue un destacado escritor senegalés anticolonialista que se pasó al cine durante el "interludio de las independencias", de 1960 a 1965, con su primera película Borom Sarret (1963, lo que le convirtió en pionero del cine africano. Su revolucionaria cinematografía y su proyecto artístico radical lo catapultaron al panteón de la cinematografía mundial. Basándonos en la crítica cinematográfica poscolonial, este artículo se centra en sus dos primeras películas: Borom Sarret y Niaye (1964). El argumento principal es que Sembene realizó estratégicamente estas películas para contribuir de forma genuina al esfuerzo colectivo de la reconstrucción nacional, poniendo énfasis en la relación de género. El artículo comienza con un breve repaso de las obras literarias que Sembene publicó durante el periodo estudiado, con especial enfoque en la masculinidad, para comprender mejor las dinámicas de poder y su impacto desde una perspectiva artística. A continuación, profundiza en el análisis del legado colonial y ancestral en Borom Sarret y, por último, se centra en Niaye para explorar la representación de la memoria colectiva y las dinámicas patriarcales en una sociedad seudofeudal en transición del colonialismo a la independencia, por un lado, y de la tradición a la modernidad, por el otro. Este artículo contribuye a una mejor comprensión de cómo Sembene abordó la transformación social, navegó por las estructuras del poder (pos)colonial conformadas por legados coloniales y ancestrales, y se estableció como artista iconoclasta.*

**Palabras clave:** masculinidad, poscolonialismo, estudios cinematográficos, transformación social, Sembene Ousmane.

## 1. Introduction

“I don't invent anything. Go down the streets of Dakar and you will find there the people portrayed in my works... We must look after our authenticity, not be afraid of showing what is ugly and refuse to pander to people. Our duty is to show how we are, and say what we can change here or there.” (Sembene, 1973)<sup>1</sup>

Sembene Ousmane<sup>2</sup> was a renowned Senegalese writer and filmmaker. He was born on January 8, 1923,<sup>3</sup> and passed away in Dakar on June 7, 2007. His artistic journey began in France, where he arrived in 1948 and worked as a docker in the port of Marseille. His first poem, “Liberté” (‘Freedom’), was published in the magazine *La Croix du Sud*<sup>4</sup> in 1956, followed by his first two novels, *Le Docker Noir* (‘The Black Docker’) in 1956 and *Ô Pays, mon Beau Peuple* (‘Oh Country, My Beautiful People’) in 1957. However, it was his masterpiece *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (‘God’s Bits of Wood’, 1960) that established Sembene as an anti-colonial writer (Diagne, 2014). In his forties, he returned to Africa at the independence of his country in 1960 and shifted to cinema, releasing his first fiction film, *Borom Sarret*, in 1963 (the same year he made the documentary film *The Sonhrai Empire*). He simultaneously published books and released films. His repertoire consists of five novels, five collections of short stories and thirteen films. He adapted some of his own novels to films: *Niaye* (1963), *La Noire de...* (‘Black Girl’... 1966) *Mandabi* (1968) and *Xala* (1975).

For several reasons, in order to understand Sembene’s films, we need to first consider his literary works. All Sembene the novelist needed was a pen and a blank page to create a *mise en abyme*<sup>5</sup> of his characters to denounce injustices, inequality and the exploitation of the dehumanized others. In contrast, filmmaking during the independence era involved significant challenges. Firstly, Sembene had to master an exclusively Western medium and adapt it to African cultural codes. Secondly, the film business (production and distribution) in Francophone Africa was controlled by Paris (Diawara, 1992). Finally, the popular nature of cinema –like its interaction with the audience– and its capacity to raise awareness placed the filmmaker in a special relationship with those in power, the (post)colonial ruling class, often sensitive to social criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Sembene, O. (1973, January). Interviewed in *Jeune Afrique*, no. 27. Translated from the French by A. Bove. In A. Busch & M. Annas (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembene: Interviews* (p. 53). University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Sembene Ousmane initially wrote his name in the order of the civil registration (Ousmane Sembène), as it appears in his first three novels. He later altered this order in his post-independence publications and began writing as Sembene Ousmane (without accent on the ‘è’), as we can appreciate in *Voltaïque* (1962) and *L'Harmattant* (1964). He would later retain this style in all his films, even if the English versions of some of them preserved the official style (Ousmane Sembene). During the archival work I conducted at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, where Sembene Archives are located, I realized that he always used his family name Sembene (without è) in all the correspondences with his editor and reviewers, including during the writing process of his first novels. In light of these remarks, I have chosen to respect Sembene’s choice and apply it in this article.

<sup>3</sup> According to Samba Gadjigo, Sembene’s biographer, Sembene official birthday (January 8, 1923) is not his true date of birth. He mentions that Sembene himself once said he was born eight days earlier (Gadjigo, 2010, p. 7).

<sup>4</sup> *La Croix du Sud* was a literary and cultural magazine published in France in the 1950s. It was known for promoting literature and culture from French overseas territories and colonies. Sembene’s manuscripts had been rejected by *Présence Africaine*, the publishing house set up by the elites of the African diaspora educated in France, especially the writers of the negritude movement, including Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimée Césaire, and Alioune Diop (the director). Sembene’s early texts were rejected for not meeting the French linguistic standards.

<sup>5</sup> This is a French term that refers to a self-referential technique in which a work contains a smaller part that reflects the whole, creating a kind of recursive effect. It is often depicted as a story within a story or a picture within a picture, which serves to highlight themes, symbolism, or concepts within the larger work.

Sembene could be considered a “master jeweler” for his precision, attention to detail and ability to portray the transformation of Senegalese and African societies. He deeply engaged in profound introspection about himself, his community and his world to denounce the problems of common people confronted with their colonial and ancestral legacies, as well as alienation, religious authoritarianism and subjugation. Sembene’s films reflect him, and this is because he excelled as a screenwriter, director, producer and even actor in some of his films. His extraordinary contribution has consolidated his status as the “dean of African filmmaking”,<sup>6</sup> “father of African cinema”<sup>7</sup> and the “grandfather of African Feminism”.<sup>8</sup>

This article engages in a systematic exploration of *Borom Sarret* and *Niaye*, Sembene’s first two films. *Borom Sarret* portrays the daily activities of a cartman who has his cart confiscated for entering the “Europeanized” Dakar Plateau, district of the capital. The plot recounts the colonial legacy, cultural amalgam and social transformations in Senegalese society during the early independence days and their implications for ordinary people. The second film, *Niaye*, delves into a sensitive moral issue. It is inspired by a true story of incest in a Senegalese village during the downfall of colonization. Sembene addresses the interconnection of ancestral social hierarchies and the enduring impact of patriarchy in the final years of colonial administration. After the film’s release, Sembene was accused of exposing the “dirty laundry” of Senegalese society to outsiders, and *Niaye* was banned.

The article contributes to a better understanding of Sembene’s cinematic narrative during the early years of Senegal’s independence by answering the following questions: How did Sembene’s transition to cinema influence his exploration of masculinity in the (post)colonial context, given the impact of ancestral and colonial legacies in Senegal during the early years of the independence (1960-1965)? In what ways did Sembene’s cinematic narrative contribute to the broader (post) colonial reconstruction efforts from a gender perspective, particularly with regard to masculinity? To answer these questions, this article examines how he navigated (post)colonial institutions to critically address social transformation while establishing his cinematic project.

Scholars have broadly discussed Sembene’s transition to cinema and examined the political and “social realistic” aspects of his artistic commitment (Vieyra, 1972; Moore, 1973; Pfaff, 1984). Numerous articles have demonstrated that his early films offer sociological insights, broad cultural representations, social critique and political commentary of contemporary African postcolonial societies (e.g., Mortimer, 1972; Diawara, 1988; Mermin, 1995; Weaver, 2004; Genova, 2006; De Groof, 2010; Lifongo, 2011; Diop, 2020). However, Sembene critique of gender, particularly masculinity, has received only limited attention despite notable contributions (Chr  ach  in, 1997; Murphy, 2000; Gadjigo, 2010; Fofana, 2012). It is thus pertinent to study his work as a contribution to masculinity studies in postcolonial reconstruction while analyzing the impact of colonial transition on his early films.

.....

<sup>6</sup> See Tucker, N. (2004, December 3). Moolaad  : A Harsh Look at a Brutal Ritual: Sembene, 81, a novelist and social critic who has become the dean of African filmmaking. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2004/12/03/moolaade-a-harsh-look-at-a-brutal-ritual/89d6728f-1263-4a4d-a26b-28f1058d186b/>

<sup>7</sup> See Shiri, K. (2007, June 12). Goodbye to the father of African cinema. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2007/jun/12/goodbyetotheaterofafric>

<sup>8</sup> See Janis, M. (2008). Remembering Sembene: The grandfather of African Feminism. *CLA Journal*, 51(3).

In this article, I argue that Sembene's early cinematic perspective focused on contributing to (post)colonial reconstruction. From a gender perspective I demonstrate that his approach to independence offers both implicit and explicit critiques of ongoing social transformation, as well as a nuanced denunciation of gender relations and patriarchy. As a debutant filmmaker, he faced several challenges in establishing a cinematic language that could better reflect the African cultural realm. Sembene skillfully employed symbols, parables of African cultural codes, artistic expressions, as well as local objects, clothing and settings to establish a genuine and relatable connection with the experiences of the Senegalese/African people. Despite initially using the French language, a powerful instrument of colonization, Sembene conveyed a compelling message about what's at stake for the people, whether it is a political decision, an economic venture or a social cause.

This article contributes to the growing field of postcolonial film criticism (Diawara 1992; Russell, 1998; Stam, 2000) that examines the "triangular relationship"<sup>9</sup> between cinema, colonialism and emancipation. This implies acknowledging that, in its early days, the cinematic narrative on Africa was a colonial apparatus designed to conquer ways of seeing, to record histories and ways of life in order to fulfill the "imperial vision of the world" (Bensmaïa, 2007, p. 73). During the colonial era, cinema made a significant contribution to documenting, exploring and, most importantly, conquering visual representation, thereby reinforcing colonial ideologies and perpetuating a dominant Western narrative. Postcolonial film criticism disrupts this Westernized colonial narrative of Africa while challenging socio-political dynamics that emerged in the "postcolony" (Mbembe, 2001).

The methodology employed is multifaceted. I analyze Sembene's novels, short stories and films produced during Senegal's independence interlude. I draw on primary sources, including interviews with the author himself and newspapers, to provide a nuanced understanding of the socio-political and cultural landscape of the period.<sup>10</sup> This intertextual analysis allows me to critically assess Sembene's films and texts, tracing thematic elements. I carefully study cinematography, narrative, character development and discourses to identify how they reflect or respond to the socio-historical context. This entails an in-depth analysis of visual semiotics to decode visual symbols, metaphors and imagery to decode hidden meanings and socio-political commentary.

The article is divided into three parts. First, I briefly review Sembene's literary works, particularly his short stories collection *Voltaïque* (1962) and his novel *L'Harmattan* (1964), in order to describe his critique of masculinity in the transition to cinema and to assess the difference between his thematic choices for film and literature. Next, I explore the colonial legacy and social transformation in *Borom Sarret*. Finally, I focus on the transition from ancestral, semi-feudal social structure to modernity in a patriarchal setting in *Niaye*.

<sup>9</sup> On the idea of triangular relationship, see Viyera, P. S. (Undated). *Le cinéma africain d'expression française*. Presented at the Conférence sur le festival international du film d'expression française. Ousmane Sembene's Archives, Box 18, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington. See Sembene, O. (Undated). *Moi, un noir, Le cinéma et Afrique Noire*. In Ousmane Sembene's Archives, Box 16, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington.

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, access to Sembene's archives at the Lilly Library at Indiana University-Bloomington provided me with crucial data, thus easing the challenging task of research.

## 2. The Interlude of Independence and Sembene's Artistic Journey

When Sembene returned to Senegal in 1960, he set out to explore other African countries to better understand their peoples and diverse cultures, of which he knew nothing beyond his native West African.<sup>11</sup> During this African tour, Sembene realized that his books were unknown to African audiences due to their low levels of education. This prompted him to explore an alternative to literature to engage with Africans on the complexities of independence. Sembene was crossing the Congo River, during the leadership of Patrice Lumumba, when he was persuaded to make films to reach the African people.<sup>12</sup>

Sembene then turned to cinema because “it goes further than books.”<sup>13</sup> The analogy of this artistic journey is portrayed in his novel *L'Harmattan* (Sembene, 1964), written during his journey across the continent.<sup>14</sup> Lèye, one of the novel's central characters, is a poet and an anticolonial activist –much like Sembene in his early days– who realizes the limits of poetry and decides to shift to painting to better convey his vision of the people and the political context. *L'Harmattan* is fiction novel about an unknown African country dedicated to Rubén Um Nyobè, a revolutionary anticolonial intellectual and leader of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (‘Union of the Peoples of Cameroon’, UPC), assassinated by the French colonial army on September 13, 1958.<sup>15</sup> In this novel, Sembene depicts the circumstances of the 1958 referendum campaign.<sup>16</sup> Prime Minister Tambo Youssidou, a YES supporter, and Lèye, a representative of the National Liberation Political Party (Le Front) and a NO advocate, represent the two sides of the political context that marked the vicissitudes of African peoples in French colonies toward self-governance.

Youssidou's position aligns with that of France, claiming that Africa is not ready for self-government. For him, the country should remain within the Communauté Française<sup>17</sup> to benefit from France's economic and technical assistance. On the contrary, Lèye believes that Africans should industrialize their country, without “mortgaging” it by subjecting it to foreign financial forces (*L'Harmattan*, p. 210). Lèye's speech recalls Sekou Touré famous phrase to de Gaulle.<sup>18</sup> *L'Harmattan* shows Sembene's rejection of the French Community. It highlights the tension between those who

<sup>11</sup> Sembene acknowledged this in many interviews.

<sup>12</sup> Affner, P. (1978). Sembène Ousmane in Kinshasa. *Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture*, 37, 82-97.

<sup>13</sup> Ghali, N. (1976). Interview with Ousmane Sembène. *Cinéma*, 76(208), 79.

<sup>14</sup> The analysis of the correspondence between Sembene and his publisher, to which I had access during my archive work at “Sembene Ousmane Archives”, at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, reveals that the novel was written during his journey across the continent.

<sup>15</sup> See Blanchard, P. (Director). (2020). *Décolonisations: Du sang et des larmes* [Documentary]. Part I. [Timestamp 00:41:50].

<sup>16</sup> In November 1958, a referendum was held in the two federal colonial entities of AOF (French West Africa) and AEF (French Equatorial Africa). The native population was invited to choose between YES (belonging to the French Community) and NO (breaking off relations with France).

<sup>17</sup> In August 1958, de Gaulle undertook his famous African tour to propose the Communauté Française (a French Commonwealth). France was keen to preserve its relationships with its former colonies, recognizing their importance in various aspects of the national interest. The French Community took shape with the creation of the Ministry of Cooperation in 1961 to provide essential resources and assistance. Through the Ministry of Cooperation, financial and technical resources were provided to the former colonies, helping to preserve France's dominant cultural, linguistic and economic position in the region.

<sup>18</sup> Sékou Touré called for a clean break from France and rejected the proposal: “We have a primary and essential need, that of our dignity... we prefer our freedom in poverty to wealth in slavery” (Blanchard, 2020, Part I, 00:41:50).

advocated maintaining ties with former colonial powers for economic benefits, and those who saw independence as the path to true self-determination and development.

Sembene's approach in *L'Harmattan* is deeply marked by a gender perspective on the anticolonial struggle for the independence and emancipation of African's countries. Female Characters such as Tioumbé play a central role. Presented as a member of the Front's leading committee, Tioumbé symbolizes radical opposition to colonial rule. Unlike her male counterparts, such as her own boyfriend, who moved to the Republic of Guinea, where the NO side won, Tioumbé is convinced that Africa will be free only when all countries have achieved full independence. Ideologically, Tioumbé's thoughts are inspired by a Marxist approach. As she expresses in her dialogue with Father Bernard: "Mice pair up to nibble on the sleeper's foot: one blows, the other bites. The one that bites is imperialism and the other is religion" (p. 77). In this regard, Tioumbé represents Sembene's female alter ego, for the filmmaker consistently claimed his attachment to Marxism.

Sembene's Marxist and gender perspective is evident in his collection of short stories, *Voltaïque* (1962). Most of the text, such as *La Noire de...* (*Voltaïque*, pp. 157-184) and *Lettres de France* (*Voltaïque*, pp. 73-116) were written while Sembene was living in France, although this anthology transcends that period. It plunges us into the early years of Senegalese independence. Texts such as the opening short story, *Devant l'Histoire*, or *La Mère* (*Voltaïque*, pp. 37-42) address issues such as the critique of negritude through the prism of alienation and cultural hybridity, and the repudiation of pre-colonial African feudal and aristocratic systems. It also contains incisive texts that criticize (post)colonial Senegalese society. For example, in *Ses trois jours* (*Voltaïque*, pp. 43-79), the emotional abuse and physical exploitation caused by polygamy become the tridents of Sembene's postcolonial narrative. Noubé, Moustaph's second wife, is a victim of the sadistic nature of polygamous abuse. Moustaph is portrayed as a narcissistic, selfish man; his two wives must spend three days with him, during which time they must prove their ability to care for their husband. Noubé and her cowife contend for their husband's attention and consideration. As a result, they are exploited as submissive wives and burdened as mothers. Sembene illustrates how polygamy in a patriarchal setting promotes competition between women and their subsequent exploitation.

In *Voltaïque*, Sembene also criticizes the materialistic aspect of dowry and its impact on women's exploitation, as in the case in *Lettres de France* (*Voltaïque*, pp. 75-114). Nafy is a well-educated young woman who, as a child, dreamed of breaking free from her husband's authority. However, one day, Nafy's father shows her a photo of Demba, a migrant in France who wishes to marry her. This simple gesture is enough to tie Nafy's life to a man she had never met. Nafy's marriage to Demba provides financial support to her family. Safi Faye, Senegal's first female filmmaker, addresses this issue in her film *Mossane* (1996). Mossane, a beautiful young girl, is romantically involved with a poor university student. In the hope of improving their social status, Mossane's family forces her to marry a man much older than her, but who, like Demba, lives in France. Mossane's marriage to this man secures financial support for her family. While trying to escape, Mossane is bitten by a snake and dies. Faye's approach goes further than that of Sembene. For her, the capitalist nature of the dowry is killing Senegalese women.

In the context of capitalist exploitation and its resulting class stratification, Sembene's perspective on the dowry must be understood in a manner analogous to the use of merchet in

thirteenth-century feudal Europe. While both dowry and merchet involve the transfer of property or wealth in the context of marriage, it is important to note that the practices associated with both concepts have evolved over time, and their meanings vary according to different cultural and historical contexts. For instance, the concept of merchet was rooted in the European feudal system, where the lord had certain rights over those who lived on his land. Marriage was considered a significant event, and the lord asserted his authority by receiving a payment when a woman married and left his domain. This payment was essentially a fee or a compensation for the bride's departure from the lord's jurisdiction and her entry into a new household that may escape the lord's authority.<sup>19</sup>

In some Black African societies, the financial capacity of suitors often plays a decisive role when several individuals are vying for a woman's attention. Like Sembene's short stories, *Trois Prétendants, un Mari* (1960) by Guillaume Oyono-Mbia provides compelling examples of the relationship between capitalist dowry and masculinity in postcolonial Africa. The Oyono Mbia's story revolves around Juliette, an educated young woman with three suitors: Ndi, an illiterate farmer; Mbia, a civil servant, and Oko, Juliette's boyfriend. According to the ancestral norms and lineage, the civil servant Mbia cannot marry Juliette. However, because of Mbia's privileged position and wealth, Mbarga, the patriarch of Juliette's family, finds an exception to celebrate the marriage. However, the condition imposed on Mbia is to double the dowry that Ndi had already offered. Faced with this situation, Juliette and his boyfriend find a way out. With the help of Juliette's cousin, her true love, Oko steals the money paid by the first two suitors. He disguises himself as a wealthy man, appears before Juliette's family and marries her.

Sembene's portrayal of these male characters' approach to dowry is a biting criticism of post-colonial masculinity. In *Masculinities in Global Perspective*, Raewyn Connell (2016) shows how newly independent their marketable assets or skills. These categories of men have positioned themselves in the neoliberal economy, establishing "entrepreneurial masculinity" (Connell, 2016, p. 310). Sembene's *Xala* (1975) offers a poignant criticism of this "hegemonic masculinity". Sembene's first two films *Borom Sarret* and *Niaye* show how the combination of colonialism and patriarchy and the arrival of independence created new categories of masculinities by imposing and promoting what Connell calls "the politics of masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell's pioneering contributions to the study of masculinity allow us to understand how gender orders are constructed and transformed over time.

### 3. Colonial Legacy and Social Transformation in *Borom Sarret* (1963)

*Borom Sarret*, a 19-minute black-and-white film, is Sembene's first film produced in a joint venture between the filmmaker's company Filmi Domirew and Les Actualité Francaises.<sup>20</sup> The title is derived

<sup>19</sup> On this issue, refer to Brand, P. A.; Hyams, P. R. & Faith, R. (1983). *Seigniorial Control of Women's Marriage. The Past and Present Society*, 99, pp. 123-148.

<sup>20</sup> French contribution to the making of *Borom Sarret* is obvious, even if Sembene did not have direct access to French funds. Les Actualités Francaises had access to the financing mechanism of the Ministry of Cooperation through The Consortium Audiovisuel International (CAI), created in 1961, and the Bureau du Cinéma (Film Bureau), created in 1963. An analysis of the business contract and correspondence between André Zwobada (Manager of Les Actualités Francaises) and Sembene shows that they received funding from French Cooperation. See "Ousmane Sembene Archives", Box 14, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington.



from the Wolof language and means horse-drawn cart driver or cartman. The film premiered in January 1963 at the Tours Festival in France. Right from the opening scene, the plot draws the viewer into many social themes, including social exclusion, power dynamics and the interplay between modern and ancestral beliefs. It focuses on the daily life of a man in Medina, Dakar's shantytown, in the early days of independence, reflecting a society in transformation. The film unfolds in three temporal movements, beginning with dawn in the impoverished neighborhood, moving on to the cartman's daily routines and ending with the cart driver's return home. *Borom Saret* deals centrally with the ban on horse-cart drivers entering the European Dakar Plateau, representing historical colonial segregation. Sembene himself plays the role of narrator in the voice-over, speaking in French.

### 3.1. The Making of *Borom Saret*

The use of French instead of his mother tongue certainly allowed Sembene access to a broader African and global audience, but it also reflects the influence of French neo-colonialism. In fact, the "superimposition of French" grasps the viewer's attention. In a 1989 interview, the Ghanaian filmmaker and critic Kwate Nee Owoo remarked to Sembene: "The French language has been superimposed or dubbed over the Wolof language." Sembene replied: "I started with the same idea. What I did was to take *Borom Saret* and one of my other films to the peasants in Burkina Faso and other places to show them. At that time, I thought there was nothing wrong with imposing the French language on films because the French language is a fact of life. But on the other hand, the peasants were quick to point out that I was the one who was alienated, because they would have preferred the film in their own language, without the French."<sup>21</sup> This statement reflects the ambivalence of Sembene's approach to the language issue in his early days as a filmmaker.

*Borom Saret* presents several technical problems, such as the lack of synchronization between gestures and voice-over, which can be related to a broader problem of filmmaking. In the 1960s, many filmmakers, including those in the West, faced the challenge of recording synchronized live sound during the shooting (Bouchard, 2012). Some directors opted for visual imagery, using omniscient voices and neutral tones, while others sought out voices that aligned with the main protagonist's personality (Bouchard, 2012, pp. 97-101). Bouchard's observation underscores an essential factor to consider when analyzing Sembene's early films. Moreover, there was no cinematographic infrastructure in Senegal and the editing had to be done in France (Vieyra, 1973). The problem of synchronization permeates every scene in *Borom Saret*, including those in which the griot sings the praises to the cartman's ancestors.

<sup>21</sup> Owoo, K. N. (2008). The Language of Real Life. In A. Busch & M. Annas (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembene: Interviews* (p. 132). University Press of Mississippi.



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Borom Sarret*, 1963 [00:02:16]

In making *Borom Sarret*, Sembene also encountered framing problems. For instance, we observe the presence of onlookers in certain scenes with no clear connection to the plot. This is evident in the shot where the cartman is filmed praying in his courtyard and a group of people, presumably the neighbors, peer over the fence (Fig. 1). In another example, when the cartman arrives at the market, we see a few individuals enter the frame, look at the camera and laugh. This aspect gives us the impression that Sembene filmed *Borom Sarret* in a “semi-documentary style” (Mortimer, 1972, p. 64). Despite these technical problems, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra considers *Borom Sarret* one of the most accomplished short films in African cinema. Vieyra writes, “*L’image elle-même parle toute seule, et le son, en contrepoint, apporte cette dimension qui en fait une œuvre universelle*” (‘The visual composition of the film carries profound narrative weight, while the juxtaposed soundtrack enhances its universality, making it a cinematic masterpiece’) (Vieyra, 1975, p. 160).

Sembene’s staging choices as director are an integral part of his narrative. He uses linear editing, mixing chronological sequences with a succession of events. Medium shots prevail over close-ups, facilitating audience comprehension. Notably, he incorporates various objects, like the cartman’s shoes, medals and gris-gris, as well as the policeman’s boots, uniform and whistle. With these visual elements, Sembene effectively illustrates the striking contrast between the social positions of his characters. In addition, he strategically includes static scenes, offering moments of reflection within the narrative. Whether it is the cartman lying on his cart, watching a beggar or waiting at a traffic light, these deliberate pauses encourage both characters and viewers to contemplate the events and social challenges unfolding.

Sembene's role as a narrator in the film holds profound symbolism. Many scholars, including Pfaff (1984), Murphy (2000), Gadjigo (2010), and Fofana (2012), have interpreted his presence as an embodiment of his aspiration to connect with African audiences, a notion Sembene himself has affirmed in interviews. This raises the question of his choice of French rather than an African language. Did the use of French signify a strategic negotiation with (post)colonial institutions, or was it a deliberate means of reaching a broader audience, including a worldwide one?

I argue that Sembene's choice to use French must be understood in light of the political tensions of the time and his relationship with institutions. His first four films (*Borom Sarret*, *Niaye*, *La Noire...* and *Madabi*) secured France's contribution through its economic assistance programs, which may have several implications. For example, the political climate of the time, influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War, had an impact on the reception of filmmakers with Marxist or critical perspectives, such as Sembene (Andrade-Watkins, 1993, p. 29).

Hence, the adoption of the French language can be viewed as a strategic maneuver to circumvent political constraints and secure France's support for his films. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize that this deliberate linguistic choice should not overshadow Sembene's exceptional cinematic prowess. It is worth noting that the French cooperation had its own limitations. For instance, it did not offer great opportunities for commercial distribution, while substantial financial support or extensive technical assistance to African filmmakers were very limited. Furthermore, both the French Ministry of Cooperation and some African governments attempted to ban films that criticized government authority (Diawara, 1992, pp. 78-87).

### 3.2. Postcoloniality and the Marginalized Others

*Borom Sarret* opens with the muezzin's call to dawn prayer, symbolizing the beginning of the working day and the importance of Islam. A fixed camera captures a man praying in his courtyard, while a goat in the corner of the screen forages for food, symbolizing the prevailing scarcity. The man's amulets (a local fetish) are before him, emphasizing the fusion of Islam and black African fetishism. As the man leaves his home, his wife hands him a kola nut and reminds him, "Keep in mind that we have no lunch", reinforcing the idea of scarcity while shedding light on the marital relationship: the man must provide food while the woman takes care of household chores and the children. Senegal's independence has just been announced. However, Sembene juxtaposes shots of the mosque, the courtyard and the bustling boulevard General Charles de Gaulle with its emblematic obelisk, a symbol of the lingering influence of colonialism.

Sembene masterfully depicts the environment and living conditions of Dakar's socioeconomically disadvantaged classes and marginalized outcasts. As the cartman leaves his house to begin his daily work routine, the camera captures the galloping horse passing under a bridge that symbolically divides Dakar into two worlds: the ancestral and the modern lifestyles.. The landscape, characterized by sandy roads and modest shacks, vividly represents the locality. Sembene blends the sound of the cart's movement and the horse's hooves with a traditional Wolof song played on the Xalam, creating an immersive auditory experience.

The first passengers are the cartman's neighbors, and he often carries them without expecting payment, reflecting a sense of community and solidarity. Along the way, he picks up a woman who appears to be a small-scale trader and Mamadou, a young man desperately looking for work. The bustling market scene captures the harmonious yet lively atmosphere of the neighborhood. The customers get down and thank the cartman. By way of payment, a handshake suffices. The cartman parks his horse at the side of the road and lies down, feet dangling over the cart's side footboard, waiting for potential clients.

A crippled beggar approaches the frame. He raises both hands toward the cartman to beg for alms. A high-angle shot between the cartman's legs shows the beggar's face bathed in sunlight, forcing him to close his eyes thus highlighting his vulnerability. Although the cartman cannot offer assistance, he complains about the many beggars on the streets of Dakar: "There are so many! Like flies!", he says. His contemplation, however, is not a rejection of the beggar himself but a critique of Senegal's culture of begging and dependence on foreign aid. Sembene's criticism of begging and international aid is poetically explored in his film *Guelwaar* (1992).

Sembene's role as a narrator adds depth to the narrative, allowing him to frame the story through his own lens. His narration is unfolded in the first-person singular, in keeping with the tradition of orality in Black Africa performed by griots and storytellers, who recreate and mediate between fiction and reality (Ebine, 1992, p. 7). According to Malian philosopher Amadou Hampathé Bâ (1974), griots can shape collective memory and reinterpret traditional forms of storytelling in the context of their performance and audience engagement. In this way, griots play a crucial role in shaping cultural expressions.

Amadou Fofana draws a parallel between the first person and the technique of self-expression in Sembene's films. He shows that the griot's use of the first person serves to persuade a skeptical audience and "make clear the reliability of his story" (Fofana, 2011, p. 255). Fofana links the griot's narrative approach and Sembene's role as narrator to describe Sembene as a modern contemporary griot. Other researchers have drawn an undeniable parallel between the griot's narrative and Sembene's artistic style, showing that the griot's techniques and functions served as a source of inspiration for Sembene to convey his messages while inviting the audience to reflect (Ukadike, 1994; Cham, 2008; Sikounmo, 2010). Sembene himself once said that in the past, "the griot was his own author, producer and actor."<sup>22</sup> But Sembene nuanced this description of the griot in the film.

Before embarking on the critique of the griot figure, let's appreciate the hard-working conditions of the cart-driver. The cartman is asked to transport a pregnant woman to the maternity ward. The woman's face, captured in a close-up, communicates her pain as she clasps her hands under her belly and rests her head on the cartman's shoulder. The latter begins to feel puzzled by what he calls "the actions of a modern woman." Meanwhile, a sinister screech from one of the wheels arouses his concern. If the cart breaks down, he will immediately lose his job. The cart's poor maintenance is a powerful allegory for the precariousness of life in Dakar's working-class neighborhood, as the cart plays an important role in the community.

<sup>22</sup> Pfaff, F. (2008). Interview with Ousmane Sembène. In A. Busch and M. Annas (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews* (p. 154).

After several rounds, the cartman takes a break and is approached by a well-dressed griot singing Wolof songs, surrounded by an intrigued crowd. The griot's song praises the cartman's ancestors as "brave warriors of the past". Touched by the griot's song, the cartman hands over his earnings. Sembene shows the exploitative nature of the narrative of nostalgic storytelling. Manthia Diawara's interpretation of the griot's manipulation of tradition is highly accurate (Diawara, 1988, p. 9). I argue that this scene serves as a metaphor for the nationalist narrative of independence, symbolizing the way nostalgia and collective memory are potentially exploited during nation-building to fill people's hearts with emotion while at the same time exploiting them. It portrays the exploitation of collective memory and national symbols in nation-building.

Sembene exploits the figure of the griot thanks to his ability to use satire to imbue his critique with mockery and parody. He uses satire to depict authority, the bourgeoisie and ordinary people. Ruben Quintero contends that satirists must be convinced of the rightness of their message and have a sense of humanitarianism, which allows them to convey their subjective indulgence or personal outrage. In his view, satirists transcend mere sarcasm and seek to touch the hearts and minds of their audience through tension and conflict (Quintero, 2007, p. 3).

In choosing the figure of the griot to shape the satirical portrayal, Sembene vividly depicts the emergence of a new form of capitalist exploitation reminiscent of colonial mimicry. The griot is a good example. During the griot's performance, which is essentially a ploy to empty the cartman's pockets, a shoeshine boy skillfully shines a young man's shoes in the crowd. However, the young man leaves without paying. Another example of exploitation occurs when a man from out of town seeking to bury his deceased child is extorted by the cemetery janitor.

Sembene once said that a real incident inspired the scene of the dead child: "I'd like to write a book about the story of the dead child. The story struck me so hard that I felt compelled to write it from that moment on".<sup>23</sup> In fact, Sembene explored the story in his short story *Niwaam* (1987). It revolves around a poor peasant from a Senegalese village who navigates the complexities of modern urban life in Dakar after the death of his child. Through this story, Sembene highlights how modernity disrupts ancestral values of solidarity, eroding human relationships in a society increasingly influenced by capitalist values and individualism.

Outside the cemetery, a well-dressed man in Western style, mimicking a bourgeois style, approaches the cartman and asks him to take him to downtown Dakar Plateau. The encounter between the cartman and a well-dressed customer highlights the vulnerability of the poor when confronted with money, underlining the glaring economic disparities. When the cartman reluctantly accepts the proposal of the ghosted bourgeois to drive him to Plateau, the contrast between his shantytown and Dakar's Europeanized Plateau becomes evident, underscoring the gulf between the two worlds.

<sup>23</sup> Dembrow, M., & Troller, K. (1975). Interview with Ousmane Sembène. In A. Busch & M. Annas (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews* (p. 65).



Figure 2. Borom Sarret and his client at the cemetery gate

Once on the Dakar Plateau, the cartman navigates like a smuggler. Sembene juxtaposes different sequences to create suspense and anticipation, leaving viewers wondering about the story's outcome. Finally, the policeman arrests the cartman. This scene metaphorically depicts the encounter between authority and ordinary citizens. The policeman's authoritarian behavior is illustrated when he halts the cartman and places his foot on the man's medal. The medal suggests that the cartman has served in the colonial army. As such, the medal represents his ties to his colonial memories and a symbol of dignity, as it does for many other men who served in the colonial army like Sembene himself, as he once said: "I joined the army at an early age because, in those days, it was the only way to live with dignity."<sup>24</sup> The cartman and the policeman represent two categories of men: those who replace the colons and those who are disinherited of colonialism.

Meanwhile, the cartman's client, the likely pseudo-bourgeois man, takes a cab and leaves without paying. The man represents a category of educated men who have copied the ways of the colonizer: using one social status or appearance to exploit the others, as Aimé Césaire denounces in *Discourse on Colonialism*. Sembene shows that the role assigned to the cartman by society according to ancestral beliefs has collapsed. The cartman's internal dialogue reflects a nuanced staging of the collapse of traditional masculinity: "What am I going to tell my wife? What will become of me from now on?" (*Borom Sarret*, 00:16:24). Sembene brilliantly depicts what is at stake in the post-independence era. The cartman's inner discussion about independence and modern life at the traffic light shows a common concern: "It is like being in prison; this is what modern life looks like. This is the life of the country now" (*Borom Sarret*, 00:16:59). These reflections illustrate the country's transitional phase where colonial influences persist and postcolonial masculinities are reshaping the neo-colonial power structure.

<sup>24</sup> Hennebelle, G. (1971). We are governed in Black Africa by colonialism's disabled children. *Les Lettres Françaises*, 14(4), 19. [Translated from the French by J. Enoka-Ayemba]. In A. Busch & M. Annas (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews* (p. 19).

### 3.3. The Crisis of Ancestral Masculinity

The cartman returns home empty-handed, a symbol of the man's failure. Fatou, his wife, hands over their child and leaves the house, saying: "I promise we will eat today". She thus assumes the man's role of food provider, representing a significant break with the ancestral patriarchal order. Sembene hints at the upcoming crisis of ancestral masculinity by reversing gender roles between the cartman and his wife. Many interpretations of Fatou's going out to feed her family are controversial since the arguments focus on women's incapability and subjugation in a patriarchal environment. For instance, Françoise Pfaff argues that the cartman's wife has no choice but prostitution (Pfaff, 1984, pp. 107-108). Pfaff recently confirmed this position in an article entitled *Les femmes africaines dans les films de Sembène*, published in *Africultures* in 2009.<sup>25</sup>

Assuming that prostitution is Fatou's only option for survival echoes Eurocentric and permissive views on African women, and overlooks the sense of solidarity and community ties in impoverished neighborhoods. The fact that Borom Sarret helps his neighbors and says: "This is my village" when he arrives in his neighborhood highlights a sense of community that illustrates collective responsibility and resource sharing in African villages. What's more, given the reliability of women in Senegalese society, as reflected by today's microfinancing system, Fatou may be perfectly capable of navigating her social reality to provide for her family without resorting to prostitution.

Sembene demonstrates his ability to create tension between his characters and construct a cinematic narrative that plunges to the heart of people's aspirations for liberation and emancipation. At the same time, he sheds light on the social transformation of Senegalese society at the dawn of independence. In so doing, Sembene goes beyond mere social criticism and foreshadows the profound changes he would continue to explore throughout his career.

## 4. Incest, Madness and Suicide: The Burden of Motherhood in a Pseudo-Feudal Society in *Niaye* (1964)

*Niaye* (1964) represents the second collaboration between Filmi Domirew and *Les Actualités Françaises*. The story is adapted from Sembene's short story "Véhi-Ciosane/Blanche Genèse" and features voice-overs by the Haitian actress and singer Toto Bissainthe and Sembene himself. The central plot is simple: a father, Djibril Guedj Diob, ancestral aristocrat and village chief, abuses his biological daughter Khar Madiaga and impregnates her. The villagers socially ostracize the incestuous father, who paradoxically continues to rule the village. Meanwhile, Ngona War Thian-dum, Khar's mother and Djibril's first wife, goes into hiding. In addition to the incest, her eldest son, Tanor Ngone Diob, arrives in the village mentally destabilized by the colonial war in Algeria, Morocco and Indochina. Tanor becomes the "village idiot", spending his day with fantasy military marches with his French flag, entertaining the children, dancing the tango and singing, "Après de ma blonde, il fait bon fai bon fai bon..." ('At my blond lady's side, I feel good, I feel good, I feel good'). Ashamed, Ngone War Thiandoum takes her own life by poisoning herself.

<sup>25</sup> Pfaff, F. (2009). *Les femmes africaines dans les films de Sembène*. *Africulture*. <http://africultures.com/les-femmes-africaines-dans-les-films-de-sembene-8544/>

Sembene poignant criticism addresses the downside of ancestral heritage and social hierarchy at the “dawn” of the country’s independence. The Diobène (Diob family) become the village’s laughing stock, despite their aristocratic and noble position. Obsessed with power, the members of this family are devoid of moral values and human principles. Djibril’s cousin, Medoune Diob, incites his mad nephew Tanor to kill his father. Then Medoune usurps the throne and receives the *Comendant de cercle* (colonial authority) to collect taxes. Medoune, the new representant of the colonizer, and the Comendant himself are indifferent to the murder of Djibril Guedj by his own son. Indeed, beyond the incest, Sembene denounces the spirit of domination, whether foreign or local, as evidenced by Ngone War Thiandoum’s statement: “cursed be war and the spirit of hierarchy” (*Niaye*, 00:03:25).

#### 4.1 The Making of *Niaye*

The literary version of *Niaye*, *Véhi-Ciosane*, was published in 1965 alongside *Le Mandat* (The Money Order) and received the literature award at the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. *Véhi-Ciosane* features significant changes from the literary version. The characters are presented in greater depth in the text, and the plot features multiple conflicts and twists. The short story also concisely describes the circumstances of Ngone War’s suicide, including the location, the objects and the lifeless body. In contrast, the film does not show the suicidal scene, probably to respect the Senegalese cultural code. Another notable variation is the circumstances of Khar Madiaga’s banishment from the village. In the film, the village elders expel the young mother. In contrast, the short story attributes this decision to the women, showing their concerns and fears and reflecting the isolation and cultural uniformity of the village (Case, 1993, p. 3).

In terms of narrative structure, both *Niaye* and *Véhi-Ciosane* follow a three-part narrative. The introduction of the village, depicted with a notable degree of physical and environmental degradation, foreshadows the moral decay that pervades the place. Next, the viewer is drawn into a world of psychological drama where Sembene immerses us into the heart of the story. We witness the announcement of the incest rumor at the same time as Ngone War Thiandoum, whose character becomes the main focus of the story until her dramatic death. Lastly, the film concludes with the young mother and child on the beach, far from the village.

Like *Borom Sarret*, *Niaye* presents some asynchrony issues, reflecting Sembene’s difficulty in aligning the voiceover with the gestures of his non-professional actors. A notable example occurs in a scene where Gnagna Guissé visits Ngone War Thiandoum. The camera initially focuses on Gnagna Guissé in a medium shot, with her back to the audience. In the next shot, we see her face, but her gaze and gestures are not synchronized with Toto Bissainth’s voice-over. In this same scene, Ngone War looks at her husband, who appears later in the same frame. Here, her gestures anticipate her husband entry into the frame, revealing a chronological shift. Sembene uses long, sideways shots, as well as tracking shots, to lessen the sense of asynchronism.

In addition, Sembene employs a variety of cinematic styles, with a predominance of medium and long shots, offering a comprehensive depiction of the village setting and its way of life. The rare close-ups give the viewer insights into the griot and Ngone War Thiandoum’s inner thoughts and psychological states. The use of “still scenes” is common and allows us to appreciate the



atmosphere in the village square and the gathering of men under the palaver tree. The few camera movements are from right to left, revealing the decadence of the village whose inhabitants flee to the city “in the hope of making their fortune quickly and effortlessly” (*Niaye*, 00:35:05).

Amadou Fofana argues that *Niaye* reflects the Soviet influence on Sembene (Fofana, 2012, p. 2). I would add that Sembene’s techniques also draw parallels with ancestral West African theatrical forms, particularly Koteba, characterized by the centrality of the village square and the use of humor and satire to criticize social realities (Djiré, 1978). Sembene integrates comedy and satire, mocking village elders and authority, an allegory of the country’s elites. The convergence of comedy and satire is a powerful tool for thought-provoking criticism, akin to the essence of Koteba and West African cinema (Sawadogo, 2019). Sembene’s exploration of social transformation from within reflects his dedication to a critical assessment of both past and present. His poignant depiction of reality effectively guides Africans toward a more enlightened understanding of their contradictions.

*Niaye* was banned in Senegal because it bluntly depicted social problems that many Senegalese preferred to ignore. Senegalese elites criticized the film for not presenting a kinder image of the country and accused Sembene of allowing foreigners to witness the nation’s decadence (Vieyra, 1973, p. 27). The harshness of the film’s portrayal was questioned by some Senegalese academics, who accused Sembene of distancing himself from his people and the values they once cherished (Chréacháin, 1997, pp. 122, 137). It must be said that Sembene’s Marxist influences further complicated his relations with certain Senegalese intellectuals. Sembene was well aware of the controversy surrounding his work. In the short story, he shows his disagreements with the elites and acknowledges that Africans were not ready to confront these issues, even if his short story contributes to disrupting this mindset (*Véhi-Ciosane*, p. 31).



Figure 3. Ngone War Thiandum and her cry Gnagna Guissé. Screenshot (*Niaye*, 1964)

*Niaye* and *Véhi-Ciosane* remain among Sembene's least studied works, often neglected by Academia. Critics have put forward various reasons for this, including the stylistic and structural inadequacies of *Véhi-Ciosane* and the unavailability of *Niaye* (Lifongo, 2011). David Murphy (2000) neglected the film adaptation in his exhaustive study, focusing on *Véhi-Ciosane*, while Firrin Ní Chréacheán (1997) examines the film reception by Senegalese audiences, revealing some insightful information but omitting a systematic study of the film itself. One might expect the work of Amadou Fofana (2012) to address in depth the question of Ngone War's suicide, as Fofana is one of the few scholars to engage in a critique of *Niaye*.

Sembene often omitted *Niaye* from his filmography when presenting his works at international workshops such as the Canadian Artists Network-Black Artists in Action (CAN: BAIA) during the Celebrating African Identity event in Toronto in 1992. I would argue that Sembene's decision is related to the stereotypical nature of the story. It may not have been easy for the Senegalese director to explain a shocking image of Africans outside the continent, particularly to a Western audience, due to the historical stereotypical representation of the continent.

#### 4.2. Ngone War Thiandoum's Suicide: A Cry of Heart Against Moral Decadence

*Niaye* brutally exposes the way in which the past haunts black African societies, particularly the dehumanizing effect of patriarchy and pseudo-feudal principles. Ngone War Thiandoum's inner dialogue in the scene where she appears gathering leaves to prepare the poison reflects this idea: "Indignity devours me. The war for others has left my son unrecognizable. My daughter, for whom I dreamt of a husband worthy of her rank, her father, my husband, has impregnated her" (*Niaye*, 00:08:48). Thus, suicide becomes a "cry from the heart". As Ali Mazrui suggests, suicide signifies honorable and noble action "when the life it ends at once has both aspired to great heights and descended to such depths" (Mazrui, 1985, p. 21).

A high-angle shot shows the mother walking through the bushes and dunes while her son performs warlike deeds. Facing Tanor, Ngone War intends to hug him, but the soldier pulls out his flag and begins his "military march". Then, she is left alone, lamenting her grief and feeling the entire weight of society on her. Ngone assesses the meaning of life for a mother and says, "I cannot bear this dishonor any longer... tomorrow, the sun will rise on my inert body. Forgive me, Allah" [*Niaye*, 00:08:50].

Given the religious influences in Senegalese society, particularly Islam, Sembene consciously avoided explicitly depicting Ngone War Thiandoum's act of suicide in the film. In Senegal, suicide is considered an affront to the sanctity of life given by Allah. Sembene's decision to avoid showing the explicit image of Ngone War's suicide may have been motivated by a sensitivity to these cultural and religious dynamics. By not showing Ngone War Thiandoum's inert body, Sembene might have wanted to avoid a frontal confrontation.

Ngone War's suicide must be interpreted in light of the Senegalese cultural and sociological influences. The links between external domination, religion and indigenous customs have created a complex sociocultural framework, jeopardizing gender relations, according to Fatou Sow (1985). Sow shows that before external domination, black African societies enjoyed a certain level of

gender balance, where women were mainly responsible for raising their children and participating in the decision-making process. Indeed, for Sow, colonialism and religious conversions disrupted the gender balance, imposing a Western-style patriarchy and an unequal distribution of power within households.



Figure 4. Déthyè Law, the griot, observes the situation in the village square. Screenshot from *Niaye* (1963)

As a result, Senegal's deep-rooted patriarchal structure exacerbated Ngone War's sense of shame and guilt. Her suicide underscores the burden of motherhood in a quasi-feudal society and symbolizes resistance against patriarchal abuses and power imbalances. Consequently, Sembene's cinematic representation of Ngone War's suicide aims to underline the political nature of the act of suicide.

Sembene effectively uses the figure of the griot Dèthyè Law to unleash his critique, deploying his own interpretation of the "absurd" in social hierarchization and the misuse of ancestral values. The griot represents a "truthteller" and "the consciousness of the people", as Sembene would say in his interviews. Sembene highlights the importance of the griot in preserving collective memory. "I see everything, I know everything, I am the griot of this country." (*Niaye*, 00:06:54). But Sembene frees the griot from the burden of folklore and dependence. Unlike the griot in *Borom Sarret*, Dèthyè Law works as a shoemaker while using his incantatory voice to call for prayer. Sembene honored the griot's status as an honest man emancipated from the goodwill of the "nobility" and the upper castes whose ancestors' praises he is supposed to sing.

Additionally, Sembene depicts the function of singing as a profession that anyone can engage with. At the same time, assigning the role of a shoemaker to the griot disrupts traditional West African societal norms, which established caste systems based on the profession exercised by individuals in society. It has to be said that with the exception of a few groups such as the Lebou people, to which Sembene belonged, this form of social stratification is common to almost all West African communities. For example, in Wolof culture, the society is divided between the Ngër (noblemen), the Ñeño (skilled professions such as blacksmiths, shoemakers, griots and weavers), and the Jamm (known as "slaves," although this term refers merely to a social category in

modern times). The Mandinka people attach great importance to this social hierarchy, and use the concept of *Kunda* to establish social categories based on their ancestral social status. Likewise, *Foro Kunda* (noble class), *Karanke Kunda* (shoemakers) *Jeli Kunda* (griots), and so on, are of crucial importance in relations between communities. In this structure, griots are often considered superior to shoemakers because of their respective roles and social status.

### 4.3. Transition from Tradition to Modernity

By disrupting this ancestral social order, Sembene opened up a pathway to assess the journey of the Senegalese/African societies from past to future. Philosopher Jean-Godefroy Bidima (2002) coined the concept *La Traversée* (The Crossing) to explore how African societies navigate their past, including colonialism, feudalism or ancestral heritage. This “crossing” from a troubled past to the future is encapsulated in the griot’s final words about Khar Madiaga and her newborn baby, “From them, a new future will be born”. The griot’s words invite the audience to reflect on broader philosophical questions about the nature of time, destiny and the human experience. The journey of Khar Madiaga and her newborn baby is not just a personal one, but part of a larger issue concerning the African people.

Sembene conveys a sense of hope and optimism. The griot’s declaration that “a new future will be born” implies that, despite the challenges and hardships, the journey to modern life will lead to positive change and the emergence of something better. Sembene’s hope and optimism are clearly expressed in the short story where the villagers finally repudiate Medoune Diob for his role in the murder of Djibril Guedj and pledge to strengthen their brotherhood (*Véhi-Ciossane*, p. 103). *Niaye* reflects Sembene’s belief in the transformative power of human experience and its potential for renewal and growth.

According to Sembene’s artistic approach, Africa’s future depends on the new generations symbolized by Khar and her baby. At the end of the short story, Sembene writes that the story “was a page of their lives; a new one is beginning, which depends on them” (*Véhi-Ciossane*, p. 108). Sembene was quick to embrace the idea of an “identity in movement”, a notion coined by the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Diagne, 2001, pp. 35-36) to propose the adaptability of African identity in a broader context of postcoloniality. In other words, Sembene refused to succumb to the dominant trend of identity politics, which was already prevalent at the time with the theory of negritude and the nationalist ideologies of African elites, including Leopold Sedar Senghor and Mobutu Cisséssoko.

## 5. Conclusions

Sembene’s transition into filmmaking marked an ongoing exploration of critical themes that encompassed the enduring legacy of colonialism, the soaring aspirations of the Senegalese, and the complex dynamics between postcolonial institutions, governmental structures and the daily lives of citizens. In his cinematic debut, Sembene adeptly critiqued and probed the contradictions and ambivalences that emerged in the early years of independence.

*Borom Sarret* and *Niaye* offer a stark message about the emergence of a new form of colonialism fueled by evolving notions of masculinity that disrupt prevailing patriarchal social hierarchies. These themes were further explored in later works like *La Noire de...* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Tauw* (1970) and *Xala* (1975). *Borom Sarret*, in particular, deftly foreshadows the erosion of traditional masculinity and the rise of female leadership, a theme that Sembene would explore in depth in his later films *Faat Kine* (2000) and *Moolaade* (2004).

Sembene's first two films served as metaphorical cornerstones for the social transformation underway. They offer profound philosophical reflection on the themes of colonial and ancestral legacies, as well as the evolving dynamics of masculinity. Nevertheless, Sembene's cinematic oeuvre also conveys a potent message of hope, interconnection, cultural preservation and the pivotal role of individuals in shaping the future. These films encourage viewers to contemplate the broader significance of the characters' journeys and their rightful place within the great tapestry of human existence.

---

## Bibliographic References

### Books

- Sembene, O. (1975). *Ô pays, mon beau peuple*. Pocket.
- Sembene, O. (1987). *Niiwam and Taaw*. Présence Africaine.
- Sembene, O. (1973). *Le docker noir*. Présence Africaine.
- Sembene, O. (1966). *Le Mandat*. Présence Africaine.
- Sembene, O. (1960). *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. Présence Africaine.
- Sembene, O. (1964). *L'Harmattan*. Présence Africaine.
- Sembene, O. (1962). *Voltaïque*. Présence Africaine.

### Filmography

- Sembene, O. (1963). *Borom Sarret (The Cartman)* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1964). *Niaye* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1966). *La noire de... (Black Girl)* [Film]. France-Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1968). *Manda bi (The Money Order)* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1970). *Taaw* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1974). *Xala* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (1992). *Guelwaar* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (2000). *Faat Kine* [Film]. Senegal.
- Sembene, O. (2005). *Moolaade* [Film]. Senegal.

## Bibliography

- Andrade-Watkins, C. (1993). Film production in Francophone Africa 1961 to 1977: Ousmane Sembène – An Exception. In S. Gadjigo et al. (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembène, Dialogues with Critics and Writers* (pp. 29-38). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Bâ, A. H. (1976). En Afrique cet art où la main écoute. *Le courrier*.
- Bensmaïa, R. (2007). A cinema of Cruelty. In J. Rouch & J. Ten Brink (Eds.), *Building Bridges* (pp. 73-85). Wallflower.
- Bidima, J.-G. (2002). Introduction. De la Traversée : Raconter des Expériences, Partager le Sens. *Collège international de Philosophie*, 2(36), 7-18.
- Blanchard, P. & Korn-Brzoza, D. (2020). *Décolonisations, du sang et des larmes* (2 × 80 min). France.
- Bouchard, V. (2012). *Pour un Cinéma Léger et Synchrone. Invention d'un dispositif à L'office du film à Montréal*. Presses Universitaires de Septentrion.
- Busch, A. & Annas, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Case, F. I. (1993). Aesthetics, Ideology, and Social Commitment in the Prose Fiction of Ousmane Sembène. In S. Gadjigo et al. (Eds.), *Ousmane Sembène, Dialogues with Critics and Writers* (pp. 3-13). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Cham, M. (2008). Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the Films of Ousmane Sembene. *Contributions in Black Studies*, 11(4).
- Connell, R. & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- Connell, R. (2016). Masculinities in Global Perspective: Hegemony, Contestation, and Changing Structures of Power. *Theory and Society*, 45(4), 303-318.
- Crettien, C. (1985). France's Relations with Her Former Colonies. *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, 8, 1-8.
- De Groof, M. (2010). Black Film Label. Negritude and Camera. *Third Text*, 24(2), 249-262.
- Diagne, I. (2014). *Lire et relire Sembene Ousmane*. Harmattan.
- Diagne, S. B. (2001). *Africanité et écriture en Français*.
- Diawara, M. (1988). Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African Film. *Film Quarterly*, 41(3), 6-14.
- Diawara, M. (1992). *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Diop, S. (2020). Sociopolitical Representations in African Cinema. *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement*, 45(2), 89-102.
- Djiré, I. B. (1979). *Mémoire de fin de d'étude : Recherches sur le Koteba*. École Normale Supérieure de Bamako.

- Fofana, A. T. (2012). *The Films of Ousmane Sembène: Discourse, Politics, and Culture*. Cambria Press.
- Gadjigo, S. et al. (1993). *Ousmane Sembène, Dialogues with Critics and Writers*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gadjigo, S. (2010). *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*. Indiana University Press.
- Genova, J. E. (2020). Cinema and the Struggle to (De)colonize the Mind in French/Francophone West Africa (1950s-1960s). *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 39(1), 50-62.
- Mazrui, A. (1965). Sacred Suicide. *Transition*, 21, 10-15.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Moore, C. D. (1973). *Evolution of an African Artist: Social Realism in the Works of Ousmane Sembène* [PhD dissertation]. Indiana University.
- Mortimer, R. A. (1969). Ousmane Sembene and the Cinema of Decolonization. *African Arts*, 5(3), 26-27+64-68+84.
- Murphy, D. (2001). *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction*. Africa World Press.
- Oyono-Mbia, G. (1960). *Trois prétendants... un mari*. Pocket.
- Pfaff, F. (1984). *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene, a Pioneer of African Film*. Greenwood Press.
- Quintero, R. (2007). *A Companion to Satire*. Blackwell.
- Russell, S. A. (1998). *Guide to African Cinema*. Greenwood Press.
- Sawadogo, B. (2019). *West African Screen Media: Comedy, Series, and Transnationalization*. Michigan State University.
- Sikounmo, H. (2010). *Ousmane Sembène: Écrivain populaire*. Harmattan.
- Sow, F. B. (1985). Muslim Families in Contemporary Black Africa. *Current Anthropology*, 26, 563-570.
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell.
- Ukadike, N. F. (2002). *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Vetinde, L. (2011). Sex, Power, and Community in Ousmane Sembène's Véhi-Ciosane. *Matatu—Journal for African Culture and Society*, 14, 441-454.
- Vieyra, P. S. (1972). *Ousmane Sembène: cinéaste. Première période 1962-1971*. Présence Africaine.
- Weaver, H. D. (2004). The Contestation of African Cinema: The Early post-Independence Filmmaking of Sembene Ousmane and his Courageous Afro-centric Colleagues. *Présence Africaine*, 2(170).