The Buffalo Film Seminars

Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

(The online version of this handout contains working URLs.)

Directed by Ousmane Sembène
Writing Credits Ousmane Sembene (based on a novella by, writer)
Produced by André Zwoboda
Cinematography Christian Lacoste
Film Editing André Gaudier

Cast
Mbsine Thérése Diop…Diouana
Anne-Marie Jelinek…Madame
Robert Fontaine…Monsieur
Momar Nar Sene…Diouana's Boyfriend
Ibrahim Boy…Boy with Mask
Bernard Delbard…Young Male Guest
Nicole Donati…Young Female Guest
Raymond Lemeri…Old Male Guest (as Raymond Lemery)
Suzanne Lemeri…Old Female Guest (as Suzanne Lemery)
PhilippeCouple's Oldest Son
Sophie…Couple's Daughter
Damien…Couple's Youngest Son
Toto Bissainthe…Diouana (voice)
Robert Marcy…Monsieur (voice)
Sophie Leclerc…Madame (voice)
Ousmane Sembène…The Teacher (uncredited)

OUSMANE SEMBENE (b. Born: January 1, 1923 in Ziguenchor, Casamance, Senegal—d. June 9, 2007, age 84, in Dakar, Senegal) is the first film director from Africa to gain international recognition is described as the father of African cinema. Born in the Ziguinchor village in the province of Casamance, south Senegal, he was the son of a fisherman and nephew of an Islamic scholar, but his two grandmothers were his main influence. Expelled from a colonial school for striking a French teacher, he was sent to his father's family in Dakar, where he worked at myriad jobs while reading and going to the cinema each evening. From The Guardian: “In 1944, as a French citizen, he was called up, serving in France and Niger. On demobilization, with high unemployment in postwar Dakar, he stowed away to Marseille, where he worked as a docker for 10 years until 1960, when Senegal became independent. He wrote his first novel, Le Docker Noir, in 1956, based on a Marseille strike in which he was involved, followed by Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu (God's Bits of Wood) in 1960, a moving story of the 1947 strike against the French along the Dakar-Niger railway (in which he had also participated); the book was also the first to formulate women as active agents in liberation and the historical process.” Sembène returned to Senegal with the intent of making films that would reach a rural, often illiterate, public. His career began with two short films that reflected his preoccupations: in Borom Sarett (1963), a taxi driver has his cart confiscated for entering an expensive housing estate previously occupied by the French and now by the new African bourgeoisie. The second film, Niaye (1964), was a denunciation of the hypocrisy of traditional African chiefs. Sembène’s first feature, La Noire de… (Black Girl) in 1966 is the first African feature produced and directed by an Africa “For us, African film-makers, it was then necessary to become political, to become involved in a struggle against all the ills of man’s cupididy, envy, individualism, the nouveau-riche mentality, and all the things we have inherited from the colonial and neo-colonial systems,” Sembène stated. This was followed, in 1968, by the international success Mandabi (The Money Order) based on his novel Le Mandat (1966) which looks at the effects of post-colonial Africa on the
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Sembène—BLACK GIRL—2

lives of ordinary people. Shot in dual language versions—French and Wolof, the majority language of Senegal—it won a special jury prize in Venice. Sembène’s joint careers in film and literature were always aimed at the Senegalese public (“Africa is my audience, the west and the rest are markets”) and have consistently been informed by his politics and his understanding of the contradictions of a rapidly transforming continent. Perhaps his greatest film is Camp de Thiaroye (1988) based on an actual event. It is a complex and searing condemnation of colonialism and of events written out of history, and, not surprisingly, did not screen in France until the late 1990s, although it justly won the jury special grand prize in Venice. Sembène’s themes—colonialism, tradition, capitalism, patriarchy, religion—all reduced to his portrayal of power and its use and abuse, whether by whites or blacks. His work is not that of Africa against the West but rather of Africa finding itself in an ever-changing world. He sought to speak to “all those exploited and silenced by the combined external forces of colonialism and the internal yoke of African ‘traditions.’” According to the film historian Laura Mulvey, Sembène was committed “to promoting and transforming traditional culture, to using the cultural developments of western society in the interests of Africa. Sembène is more interested in finding a dialectical relationship between the two cultures than in an uncritical nostalgia for pre-colonial pure African-ness.” The director was a jury member at Cannes in 1967, Berlin in 1977 and Venice in 1983. He received special recognition at Cannes in 1982 and in 2005, and became the first African director to hold a leçon de cinéma there. Sembène’s film Black Girl not only heralded the birth of African cinema, but also auto-ethnography. Though shot in a crude new wave style, the 60-minute film (also released in a 70-minute edition), effectively delineates the life of an unseen individual with no means of solace or escape. Interestingly, all parts were dubbed by other actors, contributing to the film’s sense of alienation.

MBOISSINE THÉRÈSE DIOP (b. 1949) a Senegalese actress best known for her starring role as Diouana in the 1966 Ousmane Sembène film Black Girl, which is often cited as one of the first feature films of African cinema to go on to international acclaim. Diop did not have an early interest in acting, but rather planned to pursue a career in textiles. Upon the recommendation of a friend, Diop began to think more seriously about acting and the arts, and reached out to Josephine Baker. After a correspondence, Baker invited Diop to visit her in France, but Diop declined due to cost. Diop frequented the Cine-Club in Dakar, where she was exposed to French and American films, and later enrolled at the Ecole des Arts de Dakar when she was sixteen, where she took night courses and studied under French actor Robert Fontaine (who later also starred in Black Girl). Diop worked as a seamstress during the day. A photographer working at the Actualités Sénégalaises took a photograph of Diop, which was seen by Sembène, who contacted Diop regarding Black Girl. Diop’s family was very opposed to her interest in the film, but after Sembène visited with Diop she decided to accept the role. Her family and those in her neighborhood did not approve of her choice, and actively scorned her. After working on two more films, Diop left acting to pursue her original career in textiles. She made four films: Animal (2017, Short), Emitaï (1971), Black Sun (1970 and Black Girl (1960).

ANNE-MARIE JELINEK (b. June 26, 1935 in Tiaret, Algeria—d. June 17, 2000 in Nice, Alpes-Maritimes, France) was an actress with tonight’s film as her sole credit.

ROBERT FONTAINE (b. June 6, 1924 in Saigon, Vietnam [now Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam]—d. April 20, 1973 in Dakar, Senegal) was known for Emitaï (1971), Profession: Adventurers (1973) and Black Girl (1966). He was married to Anne-Marie Jelinek.

MBISSINE THÉRÈSE DIOP

Senegalese director, scenarist, and producer, born in the coastal town of Zigueneh in the Casamance region of southern Senegal, where his father had migrated from Dakar to work as a fisherman. After his parents divorced, Sembène was sent briefly to one uncle in Dakar and then to another, Abdu Rahman Diop, in Marsassoum, closer to Zigueneh. The entire family was religious, and Sembène had studied in a Quran school for seven years, but Diop in particular was a devout Muslim who exerted a great influence on his young nephew. “As erudite in Arabic as in French,” according to Sembène, Diop had been the town’s first school-teacher until he lost his post in a dispute with a French colonial administrator. Reduced to manual labor, he continued to write on “the social aspect of life and the idea of God.”

Following Diop’s death in 1935, Sembène who was studying at the local École de Ceramique, remained in Marsassoum for a year and then returned to Dakar to prepare for a diploma that would allow him to enter the colonial administration. When a fight with the school director ended that plan of action, Sembène took up a succession of trades as an apprentice mechanic, plumber, and bricklayer.

“When I lived in Dakar,” Sembène recalls, “there was little else but the movies for entertainment, so my friends and I sat through so many, so often, that we didn’t even have to look at the screen. We memorized the pictures of George Raft, Charlie Chaplin, and Shirley Temple.” However, the film that had the
most significant effect on him was not a Hollywood product but *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary on the 1936 Munich Olympics. Intended as a fascistic celebration of Aryan prowess, it nevertheless enshrined the triumphs of the great black athlete Jesse Owens. “For the first time,” he explains, “a black honored us by beating the whites....It became the film for the young people of my generation.”

In his later teens Sembène spent much of his free time with the musicians and griots (storytellers) who performed in one of the popular quarters of Dakar. In 1940, experiencing what he called a “crisis of mysticism,” he returned to Islam as well. Two years later, when he was nineteen, General DeGaulle visited Dakar and Sembène conceived “a great admiration of him.” He joined the Senegalese sharpshooters and spent the next four years with the Free French Army in West Africa, Germany, and France. This experience gave him a painfully heightened awareness of the French colonial enterprise: because his father was born in Dakar, one of the French towns in Senegal, Sembène had inherited French citizenship, but he soon discovered the extent of the barriers between the French of Africa and those of Europe.

Upon his discharge (without the usual good conduct certificate), he returned to Senegal and became involved in the Dakar-Niger Railroad strike that mobilized nearly all of French West Africa in 1947-1948. Soon after, he decided to return to France in order to improve his command of the French language. Dressing himself in a fancy suit, he slipped onto a passenger ship and took a free ride to Marseille, where he had worked as a docker during his military service. After three months in a Citroën factory in Paris, he returned to Marseille and entered a training program in a foundry, but he had to give this up when his eyesight began to fail.

Sembène then went back to the docks, where he became active in the CGT (General Confederation of Workers) and, as he later commented, “since I talk a lot, I was elected delegate from my shipyard.” In 1950 he joined the French Communist Party, and he remained a member until Senegal became independent in 1960. During this period, he also began to paint and wrote some poetry in French that was published in *Action poétique*.

Reading the works of other black writers, particularly Claude McKay’s accounts of the French waterfront around 1930, Sembène came to realize that “the black experience” depicted in literature was largely that of non-Africans; even Africa itself, considered as a literary subject, seemed likely to be preempted by American and West Indian black writers in search of their roots. Thus stimulated, Sembène began working on his first novel, *Le Dockeur Noir (The Black Docker)*. This semi-autobiographical portrait of life on the Marseille docks and the effort to organize black workers there was published in 1956, and was followed the next year by *O Pays, mon beau peuple! (O My Country, My Beautiful People!)*, the story of a young Senegalese’s futile attempt to change his society after he returns from abroad with a European wife.

During the 1950s Sembène traveled widely throughout Europe, in 1957 he visited the Soviet Union, and in 1958, China and Vietnam. A back injury forced him to give up dock work, but with the publication in 1960 of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (translated as *God’s Bits of Wood*), an epic account of the 1947-1948 railroad strike, he gained recognition as a major African novelist of the post-négritude generation and began writing full time.

Moving between Africa and French intellectual circles in Paris, Sembène published a number of works during the first half of the 1960s, including *Voltaïque* (1962, translated as *Tribal Scars*), a short story collection: *Référendum*, the first part of a trilogy called *I, Harmattan (The Storm*, 1962), and two novellas, *Véhi-Ciosane ou Blanche-Genèse*, suivie du Mandatt (1965), translated as *The Money Order, with White Genesis*. All of these works were written in French—as he told a conference in 1965, “I could have written in Wolof, but then who would have read it?"

His first success with *God’s Bits of Wood* coincided with the beginning of decolonization in Africa, and a 1960 return visit convinced Sembène that it was the right time to reestablish connections with his own culture. But the visit also made him realize that the main audience for the African writer was still in Europe, for literature did not have much impact in Africa outside of the universities. It was essentially this split between language and life that brought Sembène to filmmaking: the interaction of image, word, and sound, he felt, would make film accessible to African audiences in ways that literature could never be. In Leopoldville in particular, he later recalled, “I was witness to incredible events and wanted a new medium to express what I felt.”

Returning to Paris in 1961, Sembène sought advice from the venerable French film historian Georges Sadoul, who sent him to the documentarist Jean Rouch, who in turn introduced him to the director Louis Daquin. Urged by Daquin not to enter filmmaking without formal training, Sembène then applied for scholarships to attend film schools in the US, USSR, Canada, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. A positive response from the Soviet Union brought him to Moscow for a year to study at the state film school with Mark Donskoi and then to work at the Gorki Film Studio with Sergei Gerasimov.

Returning to Africa in 1963 with a 35mm camera, the forty-year-old novice undertook a documentary on the Songhay empire for the government of Mali. This film was never released, but his next effort, a short feature on one grim day in the life of a young Dakar cart driver, promptly received the prize for a first work at the Tours International Festival, where it was premiered in 1963. *Borom Sarret* (“cart owner” in Wolof), begins like the driver’s day, with the Muslim call to prayer. Completing the first of his daily rituals, the nameless driver, leaving nothing to chance next dons protective amulets and then, taking leave of his wife and child, goes out with his cart and horse in search of their livelihood. By noon, he is asking, “Who knows what they will eat, who knows?” Yet the few pennies he’s earned from taking a pregnant woman to the hospital and delivering a load of bricks soon find their way into the hands of a well-fed street-corner griot, the traditional storyteller whose musical evocation of a glorious past has lightened, for a few moments at least, the indignities of the present.
He makes no charge for his next passenger, the corpse of a tiny baby whose father walks solemnly behind the cart. When they are denied entry to the cemetery for lack of the proper papers, the driver deposits his human package on the ground and leaves. Soon he is driving a wealthy man in a Western business suit to the Plateau—the European quarter of the city which is off-limits to horse-drawn carts. Not only is the driver soon stopped by the police, not only does his passenger run off without paying, not only does he receive a ticket, but his cart is confiscated. When he comes home with nothing at all, his wife deposits the baby in his arms and walks out the door telling him, with bitter determination, “I assure you we’ll eat tonight.”

Sembène himself wrote the script for Borom Sarret after spending a month with the Dakar cart drivers to learn about their lives and their problems. Abdoulaye Ly, who played the main role, was himself a cart driver, and with the exception of the policeman, Sembène assembled his entire cast from nonprofessionals; a practice he has followed ever since. “Professional actors,” he told an interviewer some years later, “are simply not convincing as laborers, as ordinary human beings. Of course, if a story seems right, I might consider using professional actors one day. They do make wonderful gangsters and dead kings.”

Equipped with his own camera and two thousand meters of film from the Ministry of Education, Sembène shot Borom Sarret with Christian Lacoste, a European cameraman living in Dakar. Because there were no lab facilities locally, all postproduction work was done in France, with a two-to-three-week wait for even the first rushes. The entire cost of the film was twenty thousand Senegalese francs (at that time, about four thousand dollars).

In spite of the material limitations—if not because of the challenges they posed—Borom Sarret combines simple means and complex observations to make a concisely powerful social statement. While compressing “a day in the life” into no more than nineteen minutes, it not only conveys the condition of Senegal’s urban poor but situates their experience in the large social panoramas of post-independence Africa. Each vignette is meticulously selected and designed to fill in a particular social dimension—the driver’s relationship with his wife, his child, his fellow poor; the weight of birth and death; the importance of cultural and spiritual identity; and in retrospect perhaps most striking of all (given that Borom Sarret was made only one year after Senegal’s independence), the disappointing nature of the postcolonial state, with its cemetery guards and city policemen who unthinkingly assume the repressive roles of their colonial predecessors. Paulin Soumanu Vieyra, himself a pioneer Senegalese filmmaker and critic, has justly called Borom Sarret “one of the most accomplished shorts of the African cinema.”

In terms of Sembène’s own development, the film established from the outset his basic social concerns and his insistence on linking the personal and the political. With a very different setting and mode of presentation, this continuity can be traced in his next film, Niaye (1965), a thirty-five minute adaptation of his story “Véhi-Ciosane.” As with Borom Sarret and the rest of his films, Sembène wrote the script himself. It deals with a tale of scandal told by a shoemaker-griot in a village in the Niaye coastal region. When the chief’s younger daughter is discovered to be pregnant, a migrant worker is accused, and the girl is married off to save the family honor. In fact, as everyone knows, she is pregnant by her own incestuous father. Jeered at by the villagers, the chief’s wife kills herself in shame. The girl’s brother, traumatized by colonial service in the French army, and egged on by a relative who covets the throne, murders his father. The village installs its new chief and expels the daughter and child so the episode can be forgotten. The European administrator who comes to collect the taxes praises the new ruler for his good governance but the griot leaves, sickened by so much hypocrisy.

Niaye was shot in November 1964 in the Niaye village of Keur Haly Sarrata, where Sembène recruited most of the cast. Like Borom Sarret, Niaye was a coproduction of Sembène’s own company, Films Domirev (Wolof for “children of the country”) and Actualités Françaises in Paris. Premiered at the Tours Festival in 1965, it received an award at Locarno the same year but was never distributed commercially, and Sembène wound up taking the film into the countryside himself with a projector. In Senegal there was some objection to the portrayal of incest, which was held to be unrepresentative, but even sympathetic critics, such as Paul Vieyra and Guy Hennebelle, suggest that Sembène’s first adaptation from literature to film was less than successful. For Vieyra in particular, the film failed to go beyond illustrating the content of the short story, and the student critique of village society took on a “pamphleteering” tone.

Whatever his difficulties with Niaye, Sembène soon undertook another adaptation, this time based on a story from Voletàtique. Conceived as another short feature (and licensed as such by the French coproducers) La Noire de... (Black Girl, 1966) turned into a full-length work that is now regarded as the first major film of the African cinema.

The story was inspired by a 1958 news item in Nice-Matin—the indifferent report of a “black girl” who committed suicide while working as a servant in the south of France. In the film. The young woman, Diouana, is first hired to care for the children of a French technical advisor and his wife in Dakar. The work is easy enough, the employers pleasant, and when they invite her to accompany them back to France, she welcomes the opportunity to exchange the frustrations of life in the former colonial outpost for the attractions of the metropolis. But the situation she encounters in France is far from her expectations: she is no longer a casual babysitter but a maid; the white society of her employers, once quite marginal to a life filled with family and friends, now constitutes her only environment. Stripped of her freedom, her dignity, and her identity, she chooses suicide over servitude.
As Sembène told Françoise Pfaff in a 1978 interview, “This black woman is someone who has been transplanted from her original environment. She no longer has a name. Before, she was not even aware of the fact that she was “black,” with all the possible connotations associated with this word. She used to function adequately in her own surroundings. But once she left her country she lost her identity as Diouana. She became somebody’s black maid. She became an object belonging to a white family—their trophy.”

In its film form, this original story is opened up through the use of flashbacks: its linear sequence of events becomes a juxtaposition of past and present demonstrating the contrast between Diouana’s two worlds. The social commentary is further enriched by symbolic motifs: an African mask, for example, which Diouana presents to her employers as a token of friendship in Dakar, reappears as an object of conflict between them in France, and at the very end of the film, when the Frenchman has brought Diouana’s belongings back to her family, it becomes a threat.

For his leading actress, Sembène selected Thérèse M’bissine Diop, a seamstress; he himself plays a small but characteristic part as a schoolteacher. As in Borom Sarret, technical limitations foster an economy of style that clearly heightens the dramatic impact. Even the black and white of the film stock becomes a visual metaphor for the central dynamic of the story, the relationship between the world of white and the world of black. (A ten-minute color sequence shot on the Riviera to show Diouana’s first, romantic view of France had to be cut from the film’s final version to meet the length requirement of the French license. Likewise, the separation of image and sound, more or less imposed by the lack of sound-synch equipment, is used to reinforce the split between Diouana’s external and internal lives. Her voice—actually that of another actress overdubbed in Paris—is heard throughout the film as an interior monologue (very much in the style of the French nouvelle vague) but with the employers she remains silent.

After the French premiere in March 1966, Black Girl was screened in Dakar in April and was named the best African film at the first Dakar Festival of Negro Arts held that summer; it also received the Jean Vigo prize (for the seventy-minute color version), the Silver Antelope, and the Tanit d’Or at Carthage (Tunisia). Nonetheless, French objections to the film’s unsparing attack on neocolonialism and what Sembène calls the “new slave trade” of African workers in Europe created problems with distribution. Sembène himself took the film to various towns in Senegal early in 1967, but it did not reach the rest of Africa until much later.

When the film was screened at Cannes in 1966, at least one reviewer, Jacques Bontemps, felt that “To put on the very weak film of a young Senegalese director is a disastrous and paternalistic attitude; it can only bring harm to the young Senegalese who are starting to make films.” For most critics, though, the strengths of the film’s statement far outweighed Sembène’s inexperience with the medium. Reporting on a 1968 screening in Kairouan, Tunisia, Marie-Claude Veyssel praised Black Girl as “an authentic Senegalese work which only a Senegalese who understands his country from the inside, and not with a Westernized view could conceive.”

A full decade later, when the film was shown during a Senegalese retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the critic Udayan Gupta hailed Black Girl as “one of the first major anticolonial documents of Africa.”

In the wake of his success, Sembène was invited to sit on the juries of the 1967 Cannes and Moscow film festivals. In October of that year he married and brought his seven-year-old son Alain, who was born in Marseille, to live with him and his wife, N’Deye. In 1968 he received an advance of 30 million francs (then about $60,000), from the French Ministry of Culture for a French-Senegalese coproduction based on his novel The Money Order. Commenting on his sudden change of circumstances, Sembène told Guy Hennébelle, “Of course it’s a contradiction, but it’s a minor one... Obviously this arrangement is not feasible for the long term; the development of the African cinema cannot depend on the good will of French circles. But in the present state of things, I’m ready to join up with the devil knowing that I won’t renounce any of my political convictions.”

Mandabi/Le Mandat (The Money Order, 1968) was his first comedy, his first film in color, and his first film in Wolof, the language spoken by most of the Senegalese people. The use of color, according to Sembène, was a French idea (and at the time he indicated that he was not satisfied with the results, though he never returned to black and white afterwards). Likewise, for distribution in the rest of Africa, where subtitles would not work for mass audiences, he was obliged to provide a version spoken in French. But apart from these two technical concessions, Sembène clearly had his own way with the film. As in Borom Sarret and Black Girl, an anecdotal experience in the life of an ordinary person provides the starting point for a wide-ranging critique of the society at large.

In this case, the story centers on Ibrahima Deng, a fifty-year-old Muslim with two wives and seven children, who has been out of work for four years. Out of the blue comes a money order from Paris for 25,000 francs. Ibrahima, who cannot read, takes the accompanying letter to a public scribe and learns that the windfall (actually only about $100) has come from his uncle to hold 20,000 francs until he returns and to give 3,000 to his mother (Ibrahima’s sister), while keeping the remaining 2,000 francs for himself.

The bemused Ibrahima begins to fancy himself a wealthy man and seeks to revive his long-lost credit with promise of cash to come. But while rapacious flocks of merchants, friends and relations are only too eager to accept, and share in Ibrahima’s good fortune, the bureaucracy is less accommodating; he cannot cash the money order without an identity card, and he cannot get one without proof of birth, which he does not have. Every step of the way there is a fee or a bribe to pay, or else a con man or a thief to rob him outright. In the end, when he is
bankrupt, he tells the postman who first introduced this misfortune into his life: “Honesty is a sin in this country. I am going to become a wolf among wolves—a thief, a beggar, a liar.” But the last word belongs to the postman, who counters: “we shall change this country—you, your wives, your children, we’ll all change it.”

In its focus on the rampant corruption of the postcolonial state, The Money Order offers a much more narrow and pointed social critique than Sembène’s previous films. As he explained to Guy Hennebelle in 1968, “In the countries of black French-speaking Africa (and elsewhere) we are currently witnessing the birth of a new class which is made up not so much of property owners, but rather of intellectuals and administrative cadres. It’s the appearance of this ‘new African class’ that I am denouncing.” With the shift to comedy, to a colorful but slow-paced narrative, with an African musical score (composed by Sembène himself), this sharpened political perspective is also clearly oriented to the African audience rather than the European intelligentsia. As Sembène acknowledged in another interview after the film was released, “When one creates, one doesn’t think of the world, one thinks of his own country. It is, after all the Africans who will ultimately bring about change in Africa—not the Americans or the French or the Russians or the Chinese.”

Both versions [Wolof and French] of The Money Order were shot in five weeks early in 1968, and the film was completed that July (following postproduction delays caused by the May uprisings in Paris). According to Sembène, the lead actor, Mamadou Gueye, was “discovered” working at a desk job at an airline company. Sembène makes a cameo appearance as the public scribe—a role he has taken on in real life to help out those who are unable to read or write. Working from a French scenario (Wolof was not a written language at that time) he spent a month rehearsing with the cast before the shooting began. As it turned out, separate rehearsals and gestures evolved for the Wolof version to accommodate cultural differences embedded in the two languages. Sembène himself found the tone of the French version artificial and much preferred the Wolof....It was the first Senegalese film to be distributed commercially in Senegal....In a 1973 interview, Sembène recalled how audiences responded to the film: “People discussed Mandabi in the post office or in the market and decided they were not going to pay out their money, like the person in my movie. They reported those trying to victimize them, which led to many arrests. But when they denounced the crooks, they would say it was not the person but the government which was corrupt. And they would say they were going to change the country....

The Senegalese government was somewhat less enthusiastic: according to Sembène there was an attempt to cut at least one part (Ibrahim’s observation that honesty is a sin in the country), and the very popular theme song was banned from the government radio....

Emitai (the name of the Diola god of thunder) is loosely based on a historical incident involving the anticolonial heroine An Sitoë. According to Sembène, he was drawn to her story because it took place among the Diola, one of Senegal’s minority tribes, and he wanted to break away from the mainstream Wolof culture of Dakar. Finding the real An Sitoë too mystical for his taste, he decided to drop her from the story but remained in the Diola region of southern Senegal where he had grown up. After studying the Diola language for two years and developing a loose scenario, he went with cameraman George Caristan and a minimal crew to the village of Dimbering....

From some five hours of rushes, Sembène fashioned a film of 110 minutes in which the villagers themselves play a collective leading role. As he told Guy Hennebelle in a 1976 interview, his overriding goal was to make Emitai a “school of history”—to recreate and thus perpetuate the African tradition of resistance. Acknowledging that some of the Diolas were disconcerted by the liberties that he took with their elaborate rituals, he recalled, “I explained that where I was concerned, I had a particular agreement with the fetish-gods, who gave me special authorization to proceed in that manner.”

Interwoven with the primary theme of anticolonial struggle are two social issues with equal contemporary relevance—the situation of women and the role of religion. As Hennebelle has noted, these themes are thrown into relief by tight structural parallels: the women confront the French soldiers while the men consult the gods, until at the very end of the film, the men are gunned down by the soldiers and the women are left to bury them before the gods. Even so, the message that emerges from these juxtapositions is considerably more subtle than simple exaltation and denunciation. Unequivocal in his condemnation of the colonial order, Sembène nevertheless avoids any romanticization of traditional society: “In Emitai,” he stresses. “I wasn’t content with making a film that glorified the resistance. I also attempted to show the limits of our culture. We cannot continue to live like our ancestors.”

As the ending of the film suggests, religion remains an unresolved issue. An atheist himself, Sembène clearly associates traditional religious practices with passivity: “In my film,” he states, “I indicate that it’s for men and women to decide their destinies, not for the gods.” But at the same time, he acknowledges the weight of the traditional religious culture: as he remarked in a 1971 interview: “I have never seen them [the spirit gods], but I respect them....They are importantly part of our cultural heritage, just as Christianity is an important part of yours. We must understand our traditions before we can hope to understand ourselves.”

Discussing Emitai just after it was released, Sembène observed that it was “a film that exalts a popular culture, a very important program today in black Africa, where the ruling classes are made up for the most part of what I call the ‘deformed children’ of Imperialism, cultural bastards. These are Frenchmen or Englishmen with black skins.” Then he added, “I’d like to make a film on those people, that bourgeoisie, but it’s dangerous.” In fact “that bourgeoisie” became the subject of Sembène’s next feature, Xala, which was completed in 1974 and released the following year.

While Xala was in preparation, Sembène traveled to the 1972 Munich Olympics with his cameraman Georges Caristan to participate in what was to be the official Olympics film, a
composite of individual segments by ten internationally known filmmakers. That film, produced by David Wolper, ultimately became *Visions of Eight*, without Sembène, who made his own one-hour documentary covering African participation in the game (including an interview with Jessy Owens) as well as the black September raid on the Israeli team. The same year Sembène founded the Wolof monthly magazine *Kaddu* in an effort to make Wolof the cultural language of Senegal. This issue of language and cultural identity emerges as one of the main themes in *Xala* (in which *Kaddu* is displayed and promoted).

Adapted from a short novel that Sembène published (in French) in 1974, *Xala* is a satirical comedy about the misadventures of one of the new African elite whose postindependence fortunes are marred and then wrecked by the curse of *xala*—impotence. From the very beginning of the film, Sembène’s assessment of the neocolonial bourgeoisie is translated into shocking visual metaphors:. no sooner is the French ruling order overturned (quite literally with the pulling down of their public monuments) than it is replaced by the African equivalent—a conclave of business-suited Africans and their white “advisors” who bring them suitcases stuffed with money. As Howard Schissel points out (Guardian February 4, 1980), the protagonist’s sexual impotence is “a transparent metaphor for the economic, social, and political ineptness of the Senegalese elite.”

Like Ibrahim Dieng in *The Money Order*, El Hadji Abdoukadr Beye is a man in his fifties living in Dakar with two wives. But unlike Dieng, a victim of the neocolonial order, El Hadj is clearly one of its beneficiaries. He is a wealthy French-speaking importer of European luxury goods, who not only rides a white Mercedes, but has his chauffeur wash the car in imported mineral water.

After he is appointed to the Chamber of Commerce, El Hadj decides to take a third wife, to celebrate both his new status and his unimpaired virility. But following his garish garden-party wedding to a girl the age of his daughter, El Hadj discovers his affliction. The president’s personal marabout is unable to cure him; a second has some success, but meanwhile. El Hadj is spending a fortune and letting his business fall apart as well; when his check to the marabout bounces, the curse is rescinded. His second wife moves out; the third is taken home by her mother; El Hadj is expelled from the Chamber of Commerce and replaced by a streetcorner hustler. In the end, the broken bourgeois is confronted by Dakar’s army of the poor, whom he had earlier tried to hustle off the streets. One of these, it appears, is responsible for placing the *xala* on him—a man whom he had ruined years before. The only cure is to submit to the will of these beggars and cripples, whose humiliating revenge closes the film.

Commenting on the sexual imagery invoked by the *xala*, Sembène explained to the critic Tahar Cheriaa in 1974 that “My film is neither pornographic nor erotic. This sexual aspect is only a pretext for reflection on the contemporary Senegalese society and the problematic of its liberation.” As such, he considered it his most difficult film to date, because of the contradictions it embodied. Stressing that *Xala* was to raise the issues, not to solve them, he told Cheriaa, “My problem is to show the people the conditions in which they live, to make them feel why and how their own living conditions are precisely the same, and to lead them, if possible,...to feel, to understand, to discover, perhaps, deep inside themselves, that they—they and no one else—have the real and sure possibility of changing the conditions of that life, of improving them.”

While Sembène has consistently taken such a stand, rejecting what he calls the “cinema of placards,” *Xala* departs somewhat from his earlier attempts to create new forms of political expression in his shift from realism to allegory and symbolism. The women characters are especially rich in this respect. Among El Hadj’s three wives, the traditional dress, comportment, and expectations of the matriarchal Awa (Eve), Wife 1, are thrown into tragi-comic contrast with the ridiculously westernized ways of Wife 2 and again with the youthful nonidentity of the last bride, a victim of El Hadj’s mid-life crisis of conspicuous consumption.

Alongside these three characters, who mark the stages of El Hadj’s past (and that of wider African society), the fourth woman in the film, his daughter Rama, offers the positive alternative for the future. She rides a moped but wears traditional Senegalese clothing, studies at the university but insists on conversing with her French-speaking father in Wolof. “*Xala* takes place in a period of transition,” Sembène has explained. “This young girl is like a step forward in a society which must find a synthesis.”

Unlike his earlier films, *Xala* was coproduced with the Senegalese national film company (an arrangement that Sembène later described as a “fiasco”). Even so, before *Xala* was released, it met with nearly a dozen cuts at the hands of government censors. Sembène himself distributed leaflets listing the cuts, and the film went on to break attendance records in Senegale. It was not only featured in commercial theatres of the cities and the traveling cinema of the interior, but shown free at youth centers, high schools, and other public gathering places. According to Sembène, once again audiences were quick to appreciate the story’s contemporary relevance: “I assure you, when the film opened in Dakar, no one drove around in a Mercedes any more; in the first three months after the opening, Mercedes owners showed up on foot. Otherwise there were always people shouting ‘ Opportunist! You have the xala, you thief!’”

During 1975 *Xala* also made the rounds of film festivals, including New York, Moscow, San Francisco, Rotterdam and Philadelphia. Perhaps because of the comic format and a faster pace (if not a certain relief at seeing Sembène’s target shift from colonialism to neocolonialism), critical responses were uniformly enthusiastic, from *Variety* (“strongest pic to date”) and the New York Times (“an instructive delight”) to *Revue du cinéma* (“a luminous film that’s a must to see”). Patrick Gibbs called it “the best-looking African film I have seen, and in its satire quite the most sophisticated.” But as Noureddin Ghali pointed out in *Cinema*, the real international context of the film was neither New York nor Paris. Citing its impact on audiences at the 1976 Bombay Film Festival, he wrote, “*Xala* reflects, like a mirror, a faithful image not only of an African country, but also of the Third World.”
The critical probing of internal political and cultural dynamics is intensified in Sembène’s next film Ceddo (1977). It compresses two or more centuries of African history into the events of a few days in a village that is, as James Leahy wrote in the Monthly Film Bulletin (January 1982), “an exemplary microcosm of African...society in the throes of crucial transition, brought about by external pressures and internal greed, ambition and dissension. The “external pressures” are represented by three symbolic foreigners: a European trader, a Catholic priest, and an Arab Muslim, the Imam. The Ceddo of the title are the “outsiders” or “resisters” who remain faithful to the traditional religion after their king has converted to Islam....

In March 1977 the government of Senegal. Where ninety percent of the population is Muslim, banned Ceddo, ostensibly because of objection to the way the title was spelled. In a three-page open letter to “all Senegalese and the President of the Republic,” Sembène rejected the government’s contention that “Ceddo” should be spelled with one d (an incorrect European transcription he claims) and vowed that he would not concede, regardless of the economic pressure the ban imposed. “I did not make the picture to please the government,” he later declared, “but to help African people to think about themselves—not to cry about themselves but to think about themselves.”

Although Ceddo remained banned in Senegal, it was released for international distribution after Sembène agreed to attach a disclaimer to the effect that it was “a fictitious reconstruction of a historical nature.”

...Roy Armes makes the point that Ceddo is certainly “the freest of Sembène’s films from literary forms and influences and the film most clearly patterned as an interplay of image and music.” In Sembène’s view, of course, this mastery of visual language is crucial to the development of African cinema as a medium of social change. “The cinema seems almost to have been created with us in mind, at our particular stage of development,” he observed in a 1982 interview. “We are at present making a transition from words to pictures and from pictures to sound....The transition from words to pictures enables people to see themselves—the cinema reflects their image. This is something literature could not do.”

Ironically enough, though, “the father of the African cinema,” as Sembène is justifiably called, has retained a personal preference for literature. For him, the written word permits a depth of analysis that he finds lacking in film. Indeed, it is often pointed out that in adapting his published works into film, Sembène has omitted various characters and limited the development of others in order to streamline the narrative. “But if I’m lucky,” he explains, “maybe I could sell ten thousand copies of one of my novels, but I reached millions of people with Xala.” Nonetheless (and although his career is often presented as a linear evolution from novelist to filmmaker), he has continued to write....

In her 1984 study of The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, Françoise Pfaff characterizes the filmmaker as “a griot of modern times,” and as she points out, Sembène himself has frequently drawn the same parallel between the traditional African storyteller and the modern filmmaker. “I want to be the pulse of my people,” he once declared, “and express their dreams and preoccupations as well as my political ideal.”

...As a growing African cinema demonstrates, Sembène was not exaggerating when he remarked in 1978, “In ten years you will see filmmakers all over Africa producing honest documents that will help people live far better lives. We will make you laugh, we will make you cry. And together we will question, discuss and learn.”

from Ousmane Sembène Dialogues with Critics and Writers. Edited by Samba Gadjigo, Ralph Faulkingham, Thomas Cassirer & Reinhard Sander. U Mass Press, Amherst 1993

Sembène not only defines himself as a griot, he also includes this character in a number of his cinematic works. The griot is shown performing various functions as the actor/narrator of “Niaye” and the cart driver’s family griot in “Borom Sarret.” In “Xala” griots are part of a celebration following the “Senegalization” of the Chamber of Commerce and the wedding festivities of the protagonist, El Hadji.

A number of Sembène characters can be associated with those found in traditional African storytelling....The trickster, for instance, usually a dishonest individual who personifies antisocial traits, appears as the thief or the corrupted civil servant or a member of an elite in “Borom Sarret,” “Mandabi,” and “Xala.”...

Thematic similarities can also be drawn from a comparison between Sembène’s films and African tales. Male impotence, which constitutes the basis of “Xala,” is in itself a subject which is often included in the storyteller’s repertoire. “Xala’s” theme of punishment, greed, selfishness, vanity, and waste is likewise highly popular in African folktales and so are topics of the lowly rebelling against the powerful....

Structurally, the clear linear progression usually found in Sembène’s films can also be compared to that of the griot’s story....“Mandabi” and “Xala” have the freshness and the atmosphere of tales and parables, while “Emitai” and “Ceddo” reflect the solemn tone of some of Africa’s oral epics. Sembène’s use of African languages, songs, palavers, and proverbs confer on his works the same local flavor which can be found in African storytelling. In fact, “Mandabi” was the first West African full-length feature film ever shot entirely in an African language, a practice which has since been adopted by a number of African filmmakers anxious to underscore the linguistic authenticity of their settings.

Finally, like African tales, Sembène’s didactic works are initiatory journeys which cause a new awareness and a basic change in the existential world view of both the protagonist and the viewer....

Sembène : As Françoise Pfaff said, we did not invent the griots. They exist in every country: people talk of minstrels. But in my country the griot was at one and the same time his own author, his own musician, his own actor, and his own narrator. This made the griot a very important person, despite the fact that, according to general opinion, we were barbarians and savages.
When there were wars between different tribes, griots were never killed. The griot would only be killed when he was lying. Because when the griot lies he deceives an entire people. The griot also had duties and rights: no assembly could be held without the presence of a griot, whatever the social group. If the representative griot was absent, people said: “Call his son; if the son is not there, call his wife—the second, the third, the fourth.” And if nobody was in the house, no meeting took place. That is for me the importance of the griot in my society.

This tradition is out of date and can no longer be applied today. But its spirit can be preserved. That is how one can work and be sincere with one’s own society and make people aware of their situation.

...Xala is structured principally around the notion of fetishism, presenting the rituals of the African bourgeoisie in all their contradictions. An idealisation of the West is shown to exist side by side with a profound belief in superstition and magic. In a 1974 interviews, Sembene showed that he was well aware of these contradictions within his film:

The contradiction lies in the fact that contemporary African society is torn between two types of fetishism: firstly the fetishism of European techniques, and the profound conviction of this privileged class that it can do nothing without Europe’s agreement and the advice of its specialists; on the other hand. There is a fetishism of the marabout, without whose advice any undertaking is doomed to failure. In this situation, genuine human success has nothing to do with the capabilities of Africans, but is rather the result of a happy mixture of the blessings of the European specialist and the marabout.

The truth is that this ruling class is as far removed from genuine European techniques as it is from the genuine tradition of African spirituality. European specialists are no more credible than the marabouts. Having recourse to both is merely the expression of the same impotence.

The theme of fetishism is a long-established one in Marxist theory....The process by which the ‘exchange-value’ of commodities is given almost inherent, religious qualities, effectively denying the labour that went into their making, is described by Marx as ‘the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.’ Sembène’s African businessmen, and El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye in particular, are obsessed with commodities, with the objects that prove their social status, and which stress their identification with and emulation of the West. However, they are still in the grip of the supernatural. Of the fetishist practices that marked their African upbringing. In such a context, the rituals of the capitalist world and the fetishist world are seen to vie for people’s attention: the possession of a briefcase presenting the rituals of the African bourgeoisie in all their contradictions. An idealisation of the West is shown to exist side by side with a profound belief in superstition and magic. In a 1974 interviews, Sembene showed that he was well aware of these contradictions within his film:

One of the most interesting facts about Sembène’s satirical film Xala is that it managed to achieve that which is so elusive for most African films, that is, popular box-office success within Africa. It finished second in the 1975 Senegalese ratings behind a film featuring the formidable Bruce Lee, the most successful of the Kung Fu kings who still dominate the screens of African cinemas today. On top of this success within Senegal, Xala also had a respectable career on the Francophone African film circuit. Far too often, African films never even reach a popular African public, their distribution usually being limited to the French Cultural Centres (the film’s non-commercial distribution rights often being bought by the French Ministre de la Coopération, or the African film festivals in Carthage and Ouagadougou. On some occasions, they are never seen at all and remain stored in warehouses gathering dust, as the French-owned distribution companies usually refuse to take a risk on African films, preferring to provide their audience with their tried and tested diet of karate and melodrama.

...Sembene defines his conception of the xala in the following terms:...to my mind it’s not only my main character, El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, who is suffering from the ‘xala.’ It’s the whole social class that he represents. These people, who often hold vital positions within society, are struck down with a cultural, political, and economic impotence, an impotence that saps their creative instincts. This privileged class plays a negative role. It perverts social progress towards its own desire for material wealth. Thus, it prevents the people from progressing and steals the hard-earned fruits of popular efforts for its own, unnatural ends. Being mere reflections and intermediaries of imperialism, these parvenus are incapable of developing the country. Struck down with the ‘xala’, they impose their temporary impotence on the whole nation.

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The truth is that this ruling class is as far removed from genuine European techniques as it is from the genuine tradition of African spirituality. European specialists are no more credible than the marabouts. Having recourse to both is merely the expression of the same impotence.
The film’s concern with ritual is evident from the opening scenes. In what could be described as a piece of ‘epic’ Brechtian symbolism, the African businessmen chase the Europeans from the Chamber of Commerce, at the same time removing all the signs of French colonial power. Dressed in traditional African clothes, they place on the steps of the Chamber, amongst other items, a statue of Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic, and a pair of jackboots, symbolising French colonial domination in Africa. The President of the Chamber’s speech, which we hear on the soundtrack, makes it clear that this act is being carried out on behalf of the whole nation. In fact, Senegalese business men had taken control of the Dakar Chamber of Commerce in the aftermath of the social upheaval of May 1968. Their struggle to gain a larger slice of the economic cake from the French was cast in nationalist terms, turning the issue of the Chamber of Commerce from what was essentially an economic issue into a nationalist one.

The nationalist celebration that opened the film, with its use of African drummers and bare-breasted female dancers, is just a smokescreen for the real transformation that is taking place. Such references to traditional culture are simply token gestures by those in control who seek to appropriate tradition for their cause....

[Sembe] These people that I show in my film are not really bourgeois even if they flatter themselves by identifying with the European bourgeoisie that acts as their model. In fact, they don’t belong to any class; they constitute a section of the population, a social category which enjoys an indecent level of ‘privilege’. These people were the first to call for the flag and the national anthem, etc., but once they are safely ensconced in power they have ‘won through a noble struggle’, they begin to behave exactly the same as the ‘awful’ colonists they had so vociferously denounced. No, these parvenus are not even bourgeois; they are just the extreme periphery of imperialism.

...Xala presents a society where the sign of consumerism, fetishism and socialism are shown to intermingle, creating new social meanings. ...Xala also produced a profound questioning of notions of male sexuality: El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye’s impotence can be read as a symbolic commentary not only on his class, but on notions of masculinity in general.

Ashley Clark: “Black Girl: Self, Possessed” (Criterion notes)

If Africans do not tell their own stories, Africa will soon disappear. —Ousmane Sembène

Long before his death in 2007 at the age of eighty-four, Ousmane Sembène was widely recognized as the father of African cinema. Yet he worked in film for less than half of his life. At forty-three, he wrote and directed his first feature film: Black Girl (1966), a brisk, memorably pointed tale based on one of his own short stories. It charts the fortunes of an optimistic young Senegalese woman, Diora—played by the charismatic and beautiful nonprofessional actor M’Bissine Thérèse Diop, a seamstress who made her own costumes for the film—who leaves her nation’s capital, Dakar, to work for a bourgeois white family in a small town on the picturesque French Riviera. It’s not long before Diora’s mind and spirit disintegrate in response to the crushing drudgery of her work and the callous neglect of her employers.

This elegantly stark dramatization of postcolonial pain was the first feature made in Africa by a sub-Saharan African to attract international notice. And its powerful social and political undercurrents can be illuminated by a look at the fascinating route Sembène, a talented polymath, took to filmmaking—a circuitous tale that would, in the proper hands, make a thrilling biopic in its own right.

Showing a rebellious streak that would later manifest itself in his art, he was reportedly expelled from a colonial school for striking a French teacher. Having been raised by his maternal grandmother, he was sent as a young adult to his father’s family in Dakar, where he worked various odd jobs before being drafted into the Senegalese Tirailleurs, a corps of the French Army, in 1944. After a period of service with the Free French Forces in World War II, he returned to Senegal, where he participated in a major strike by workers on the Dakar-Niger railway in 1947. Later that year, he stowed away to France, where he toiled in a Paris Citroën factory before settling in Marseille to work on the docks. Then, in 1951, he suffered a work-related accident that resulted in several crushed vertebrae.

During his convalescence, Sembène gorged on the socialist writings of American authors like Jack London (The Iron Heel) and Richard Wright (Native Son), and, following his recovery, spent his free time roaming Marseille’s public libraries and museums. He immersed himself in political science and Marxist ideology, eventually rising to the status of the intellectual aristocracy of the labor movement, according to his biographer Samba Gadjigo. Sembène also became a prolific, self-taught novelist, drawing on his own experiences for subject matter—one of his best-received books, God’s Bits of Wood (1960), is based on the Dakar-Niger railway strike. Hinting at the artist’s future foregrounding of female characters in films such as Black Girl, the novel is notable for its portrayal of women as crucial, active agents in the struggle for liberation.

When Senegal gained independence from France in 1960, Sembène returned home and decided film was the best storytelling tool he had at his disposal for reaching his compatriots, a mostly rural population among whom literacy was low. It was through visual language, he concluded, that he would be most able to fulfill his role as a griot in the West African tradition—a man of learning and common sense who is the historian, living memory, raconteur, and conscience of his people. (Gadjigo has argued that Sembène came to filmmaking as a last resort, viewing it as a necessary public service.) In 1961, he was offered a scholarship to attend the Gorky Film Studio in Moscow, where he studied for a year under the Ukrainian

Sembène —BLACK GIRL—10
filmmaker Mark Donskoy, before returning to Dakar to embark on his new endeavor.

At this point, the weight of history was against Sembène’s aspiration to make films in Africa. Because of an oppressive 1934 ruling called Le Décret Laval (named after the Vichy prime minister later executed for Nazi collaboration), Africans in French colonies had for decades been effectively banned from filming in their own nations, leaving the representation of African people there to ethnographers who, even when well-intentioned, risked exoticizing and dehumanizing their subjects. (Sembène is reported to have said to the famed ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch in 1965: “What I hold against you . . . is that you look at us as if we were insects.”) As a result, there was no production infrastructure in place in francophone Africa, or much technical knowledge about filmmaking. But with the advent of independence in 1960, the ban was lifted and a newly supportive attitude on the part of the French government toward African filmmaking began to develop, motivated in part by persuasive efforts by African film students and French filmmakers, including Rouch. In 1963, shortly after Sembène’s return to Senegal, France set up a cinema bureau within its Ministry of Cooperation, which had been created with the express purpose of providing development assistance and technical expertise to the nation’s former colonies in Africa.

Sembène set to work, making two short films in quick succession. Like the forthcoming Black Girl, both featured sparklingly harsh monochrome visuals and a clean, direct storytelling style, and depicted working-class Senegalese people struggling against bleak social conditions and human foibles—their own and others’. Borom sarret (1963) depicts the travails of a poor, luckless wagon driver exploited by almost everyone he meets; at the film’s end, he mourns the loss of his military medal, a prized decoration suggesting that he, like many Senegalese natives (including Sembène), was drafted into the French military, then left to fend for himself. The pernicious social impact of French colonialism also underpins Niaye (1964), in which a young woman’s pregnancy scandalizes her community. Though a visiting worker is accused of impregnating her, the father of the young woman’s baby is in fact her own father—a disgrace the community scrambles to hide from the colonial administration.

Despite the new conditions that allowed African filmmakers to be more productive, Sembène’s inveterate critical streak did not aid his cause. His screenplay for Black Girl, with its resolutely noncelebratory take on postindependence life for the Senegalese, was the only one ever rejected for production funding by the then head of the Ministry of Cooperation’s Cinema Bureau—the key funding body for francophone African cinema—on the basis of subject matter alone. Accordingly, Sembène invented the term mégotage (a riff on montage, translating roughly to “cigarette-butt cinema”) to describe the lengths to which African filmmakers had to go to scrape together budgets.

Black Girl, then, can be understood as the product of a lifetime of negotiating challenging power relations. Sembène subsumes this wellspring of complexity into the radiant, statuesque form of his central character, Diouana, who is first seen loner and shaken at the docks, having arrived in France from Senegal on a boat whose horn blares like a demonic warning clarion against viciously whipping winds. The film’s first words—articulated in Diouana’s plaintive voice-over—are: “Has anyone come for me?” A point-of-view shot takes us into her head space as she watches the hustle and bustle with a dispassionate gaze; it’s an unspectacular yet thrilling moment, fully immersing us in the world of an African character. It’s clear, immediately: this is her story. (It’s worth pointing out that funding constraints forced Sembène to dub Diouana’s minimal yet poetic interior monologue in French, a compromise that has the powerful dramatic effect of reflecting the psychic weight of colonialism: she must craft her inner self in a language she cannot speak.)

As it happens, someone has come for her: her employer, Monsieur (Robert Fontaine), who picks her up without ceremony and drives her through the perky, florid seaside scenery to her destination. “Lovely country, France,” he mutters—but sound ominous. The drive is accompanied by insistent, insufferably jaunty piano music—in effect, it’s not unlike Djibril Diop Mambéty’s deliberately grating use of Josephine Baker’s “Paris, Paris” in Touki bouki (1973), another classic Senegalese film about postcolonial purgatory. Throughout, Sembène flips between this Western plink-plonk and lilting, guitar-based African music, emphasizing the black-and-white contrast between the characters’ races and, in many cases, costumes.

In her new home, Diouana is first treated with brusque tolerance, which soon gives way to hostility from the matriarch (Anne-Marie Jelinek) and indifference from her husband, an ostensibly pleasant but palpably useless man who fails to support Diouana as she slides into depression. Having been promised work looking after her hosts’ three children, Diouana is instead restricted to a routine of grinding chores, and subjected to overt racism in dinner party scenes set around her employers’ dining table; these are horrifying due to their blank understatement. In one of the film’s most upsetting moments, Sembène’s camera remains clinically distant—one of the film’s most upsetting moments, Sembène’s camera remains clinically distant as a copulent, lascivious guest stares at Diouana’s behind, then is unable to restrain himself from planting a nonconsensual kiss on her frozen face. Meanwhile, other guests—clearly well-to-do “liberals,” by the way—speak patronizingly of Africans in Diouana’s presence (“With independence, the natives have lost a natural quality”).

Black Girl is especially sharp on the corrupted social contracts of postcolonial life, and Sembène roots these observations most effectively in the relationship between Diouana and Jelinek’s Madame. In a manner oddly reminiscent of the manipulations of Scottie (James Stewart) in Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo, Madame seems hell-bent on controlling Diouana in order to bolster her own flagging sense of superiority. “You’re not going to a party,” she tells Diouana, giving her an
apron to cover her effervescent polka-dot dress and high heels. The pair’s poisonous dynamic may remind contemporary viewers of the one that brews in Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave (2013) between the jealous slave owner’s wife Mistress Epps (Sarah Paulson) and the horrifically abused slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong’ o). One solitary, charged glance between Diouana and the husband, midway through the film, is enough to suggest that a similar psychosexual panic has taken root in the wife’s mind, precipitating her increasingly heinous behavior. It is notable, though, that Sembène has empathy for the pathetic creature he has created for Jelinek to play. Were the film being made through a Eurocentric, perhaps a Godardian lens, that character would likely be its focal point: an anthropomorphized slab of breathy ennui, undesired sexually by her husband. Through Sembène’s eyes, however, the focus has shifted entirely.

Diouana is a victim, it’s true, but she is also a refreshingly multidimensional character. A succession of flashbacks illustrates her previous life in Dakar, including her short-lived romance with a young student (Momar Nar Sene) and her joy at being selected by Madame—a onetime resident of colonial Dakar—to work for her in France. For the most part, Sembène keeps us at a distance, but when he judiciously cuts to huge close-ups of Diop’s doleful, open face—tears in her eyes, eyes to the sky—Diouana’s anguish registers like an uppercut to the solar plexus. Her parlous, unmoored position is reflected in the film’s French title, La noire de . . ., which contains an ambiguity lost in the stately English translation. The ellipsis after the preposition leaves unspecified whether de means “from”—as in coming from a specific place—or the possessive of, which reduces Diouana to the status of property. Both interpretations are appropriate; the distinction becomes academic in the light of the character’s swift decline and suicide—a definitive act of spiritual reclamation.

Though Black Girl operates in a mostly realistic realm, Sembène skillfully injects metafictional and metaphysical layers. Fully embracing the griot role, he appears in the film as a schoolmaster and writer, never without his signature pipe; as a local public figure, Sembène would have been instantly recognizable to his audience. The film also carries a powerful symbolic charge, embodied in the form of the traditional African mask that Diouana naively gives to her new employers on her first day of work in France. As this mask—an “authentic” African emblem for its bourgeois owners—gazes from its perch in the living room, it haunts the pallid space with pre-independence ghosts, while strongly invoking the idea, put forward by writer Frantz Fanon, of the “mask” black people must adopt in order to advance in a white world.

Diouana’s decision to reclaim her mask signals the moment at which she decides to regain control of her life, by any means necessary. After her suicide, the crushing remorse of Monsieur—he’s a clear forebear of Michael Haneke’s myriad guilt-racked French liberals—compels him to return the mask to Dakar. In an electrifying coda, the mask finds its way into the hands of a young boy there, and becomes a totem of anti-assimilationist sentiment, vibrating with pro-African resistance; it seems to almost literally propel a frantic Monsieur back toward the airport. In Black Girl’s closing moments, then, a desperately sad saga is transformed into a transcendent howl of hope for a new Africa.

After Black Girl, Sembène used his work to attack systemic perfidy, hypocrisy, and oppression in all its forms: conscription of Africans into the French military in Emitai (1971); an ineffectual, westernized black bourgeoisie in the brutal satire Xala (1975); Christian and Muslim attempts to impose themselves on African traditions in the deeply controversial Ceddo (1976); the practice of female genital mutilation in his final film, the all-out assault Moolaadé (2004). Sembène was congenitally incapable of making indifferent films, and everything that marked him out—his fire, skill, compassion, and vision—is fully present in his startling, unforgettable debut.

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2018 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXXVI**

April 10 Sidney Lumet, *Dog Day Afternoon* 1975  
April 17 Robert Bresson, *L’Argent* 1983  
April 24 David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive* 2001  
May 1 Martin McDonagh, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* 2017  
May 8 Jacques Demy, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* 1967

CONTACTS:...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com...for cast and crew info on any film: [http://imdb.com](http://imdb.com/)

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