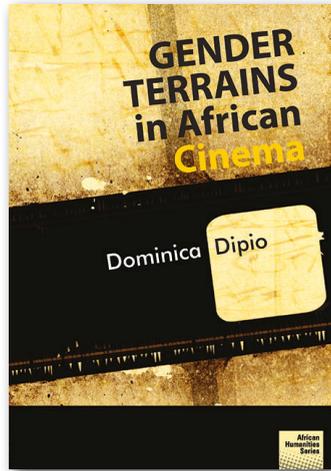


# Gender terrains in African cinema

Dominica Dipio



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# *Dedication*

To the affectionate memory of my father, Saturnino Bandhasi Okello, and my mother, Amelia Kalisa, who did not discriminate against their children and gave them the environment to dream.

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# **GENDER TERRAINS in African Cinema**

**Dominica Dipio**



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# Preface & acknowledgements

The desire to undertake this study arose from my interest in gender and the increasing attention African cinema is drawing at this point in the history of world cinemas. Attaining its identity in the 1960s, African cinema is characteristically a postcolonial art form. The first group of filmmakers and critics saw themselves, together with the political elite, as responsible for building their nations anew and came up with a series of statements which underline what cinema should be in their contexts – an instrument for educating, decolonising the mind and developing critical, participatory viewership. To some extent, the cinema continues the role of the griot.

It interests me to analyse how the cinema and the filmmaker are located within the predominantly patriarchal, hegemonic structure as they address issues related to gender and, in particular, the position of women in African communities. The central question is the representation of women and gender discourses in the cinema. The films selected for analysis are all directed by male filmmakers who are considered representative of African filmmaking. The films selected span from the 1970s to the 2000s. My focus is the comprehensive analysis of gender relations reflected in the portrayal of the girl child, the young woman and mature woman, as well as the grandmother figure, vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

My desire to engage in cinema scholarship would have come to naught if it were not for a number of people whose invaluable contributions came in handy in the process of working towards this publication. To all these individuals and organisations, I am profoundly grateful. In the interest of conserving space, I can only mention a few. I thank Makerere University for giving me the needed study leave to pursue graduate studies when I received a scholarship from Propaganda Fides – this led to me obtaining a Licentiate and PhD in Media Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (1998–2003). These were exciting and challenging years for a student like me, previously educated in an English-speaking country. Thanks to Dr Alex Thomas Ijjo for encouraging the spirit of



adventure in me, to take a leap of faith and leave for Italy where I would be challenged with the pleasure of learning a new language I now cherish.

This singular decision led to a chain of events that expanded my intellectual and social horizons in the nearly five years I spent at the Gregorian University, immersed in the culture of rigorous scholarship at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Communications (CICS). Here my academic interest expanded from literature to communication and media studies, an opening that has added value to my home Department of Literature in Makerere University since my return in 2003.

Three professors at the Gregorian worked closely with me to germinate the seeds of ideas that resulted in this book deserve mention. Prof Robert White (SJ), the then director of CICS, made himself frequently available for consultation and demonstrated great interest in developing the academic capacity of graduate students from Africa by introducing them to the rigours of scholarship. Prof Johannes Ehrat (SJ), whose film theory seminars I attended, made cryptic semiotics theorists like Charles Sanders Peirce, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Umberto Eco seem ‘user friendly’ to communication students like me who had no background in philosophy. He always brought an empathising, human stance to the abstractions of pure philosophy. Prof Lloyd Baugh (SJ), the director of my graduate research, was a partner in the project. It was his relentless red ink that decorated the pages of my first draft that immediately sobered me up and shaped my work from the onset. He taught me the fine balance that needs to exist between a mentor and a mentee in academic nurturing; the difference between drinking coffee with one’s director and receiving comments on a chapter that needs to be reworked – a crucial equilibrium in scholarship.

This research would have remained hidden away as a ‘well-written’ PhD with limited circulation, if it were not for the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and Prof Sandra Barnes and the African Humanities Programme (AHP) that offered me a fellowship year in 2009 to upgrade the PhD into this book. The fellowship was the missing link in my professional growth and development. I have since then benefited from the mentorship of senior scholars, among them Andrzej W. Tymowski, Director of International programs, ACLS, key proponent of the AHP – a forum that gave me the opportunity of wider exposure to share my research with African academics and to get useful feedback. The professional guidance, mentorship and encouragement of Prof Kwesi Yankah, one of the directors of the AHP, has been priceless. In the same breath, I am indebted to the generosity of Prof Tejumola Olaniyan who read the first draft of the first two chapters of my manuscript and gave useful suggestions just



before I started the AHP programme in 2009. Just at the right time and in the final stages of making corrections on this book, I enjoyed the prestigious Fulbright Fellow Award and the hospitality of the English Department, my host, at Kennesaw State University (KSU), Georgia. I thank both institutions. I must mention Dr Oumar Cherif Diop from KSU who was graciously invaluable, and the friendship of Prof Nancy Prochaska who facilitated the writing process all the way.

The trajectory of my research years have been laced with academic and social adventures. The most exciting of them was the paradox of encountering and falling in love with African cinema in Europe! This was a relationship that needed to be cultivated because my first experience of watching African cinema in the auditorium of the Gregorian University presented it as a ‘different’ kind of cinema from the mainstream Hollywood films I had been accustomed to in Uganda. I had to pursue this cinema where it was to be found: at film festivals. My first interface came when, under the East African Visiting Scholarship Scheme in 2000, I was awarded a three-month scholarship that took me to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The Ousmane Sembène Week that comprised screenings of the best of African films, and lectures by film directors and critics happened during my tenure at SOAS. This was my official initiation into the dynamic discourses around African cinema and interacting with cineastes and critics whose names were already part of my manuscripts. This was how I first met Prof Manthia Diawara, a keynote speaker at the Ousmane Sembène Week, and he has remained a friend and mentor in academia. It was in the lively atmosphere of SOAS, under the inspiring guidance of Dr Frances Harding, that the title of my book was born. The fresh enthusiasm I picked from London about African cinema was sustained by Centro Orientamento Educativo, one of the organising bodies of the Milan Film Festival that generously allowed me to participate as a researcher in 2001. This afforded me the opportunity to interact with film directors and critics. Peter Balleis (SJ) of Missionsprokur der Jesuiten whose acquaintance I made through a friend, Stephen Joseph (SJ), and SIGNIS deserve mention as sponsors for my participation in the Milan Festival of 2002 and the screenings at the Namur (Belgium) Women’s Conference, 2002. Such occasions were extremely valuable since the films which were my primary texts could mostly be accessed through festivals.

On the social plane, the never-waning friendship of Cristina Masia and her family, who filled most of my out-of-library time with enriching excursions – whether it was visiting art museums, tours of the ancient sites and drives through



the scenic outskirts of Rome ending in some quaint corner to eat pizza baked in a wood oven – all have their place in the outcome of this book. The amity of the Sisters of Figlie della Croce and the students' community, the Don Guanella Sisters and the community of the elderly in Pianello where I spent my vacations and made life-long friends like Annalisa Bertoldin and the family of Patrizia Foscolo, added value to my scholarship in Rome. The families of Maria Ferrari, Rosanna-Sandro Bartolini, Maris-Stella Piccolo, Alba Costa, Paola Zoccarato and the friendships of Fr Simon Peter Edema and Don Umberto Fabrizio were the anchors that kept me focused and vibrant, because they shared my troubles. I also thank my family for being extremely understanding in letting me be whenever I was too busy to attend to some of the family hassles. All of these people have variously enriched my life, making my scholarship a stimulating experience.

Finally, my sincere gratitude to the filmmakers: Dani Kouyaté, Souleymane Cissé, Gaston Kaboré and Prof Samba Gadjigo, administrator of the Sembène estate, who appreciate the educational value of this publication and readily gave me their permission to use screen shots from their films. Access to some of these artists would have been difficult without the help of Fr Janvier Yameogo who 'stretched' himself to connect us; so that even where clusters of information appeared daunting, everything eventually worked well together. Although I am entirely responsible for all the shortcomings that may persist, this book would not have attained its present status without the support of invaluable sets of people who have worked behind the scenes the past two years. I will mention among them my development editor, Dr Jacquelyn Southern, and the three anonymous manuscript reviewers. I am, ultimately, grateful to God who has sustained me through the long route to publication. I hope scholars in the fields of African cinema, gender and cultural studies will find this book worth their time to read.

Dominica Dipio

April, 2013



# 1

## *Theoretical introduction*

### **Introduction**

Gender relations and the position of women in African cinema occupy a more central position in the concerns of African filmmakers than is originally apparent. Even within the dominantly political themes African filmmakers obviously tackle, the issue of women remains a never-ebbing undercurrent that calls attention to itself. This theme presents itself as the ‘missing link’ that must be addressed in the continent’s efforts to forge a more inclusive paradigm of development. This book offers a systematic analysis of selected films by internationally acknowledged male African filmmakers, with the objective of understanding the gender dynamics reflected in African cinema. Three categories of female characters – the girl child, the young woman and the elderly woman – and their male counterparts are discussed to appreciate these relationships through the prism of the films. The ‘girl child’ category includes adolescents and teenagers, while the ‘young woman’ category refers to youthful women, both married and unmarried, who are sexually active and of childbearing age. ‘Elderly woman’ refers to mature women who have adult children, are past their childbearing years and who also enjoy the status of ‘grandmother’.

I have exclusively selected male directors to analyse because I consider them representative of African filmmaking. It is through local and international film festivals that most African art films are exhibited. The films analysed in this book are those that have been to world cinema festivals. The view of cinema as an ‘evening school’ – something akin to ‘secondary orality’ for most African audiences (Murphy 2000:68) – is essential for African filmmakers who use their art to engage audiences in pertinent social discourse in the fashion of the griot tradition that features in the theoretical framework of the book. This analysis is, therefore, interested in probing what place gender issues occupy amidst the other concerns of filmmakers and how women, in their various age groups, are portrayed in relation to men in the selected films.



## Theoretical frames of African filmmaking

It is inappropriate, indeed erroneous, to speak of African cinema as a single entity since cinema is a result of social milieu and the artist's idiosyncrasies. There is as much diversity in styles and forms as there are artistic visions and cultures. In the context of Africa, francophone, anglophone and lusophone regions all tend to have their own characteristic signatures of filmmaking, although there are features that run through these regional cinemas to cohere with the generic identities of African cinema (Diawara 1992:140; Diawara 2010:71–161).

The major themes that run through the films of the first generation of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo, Souleymane Cissé and Haile Gerima include a confrontation with forms of colonialism, the 'return to source' and cultural clash, struggle for independence, disillusionment with post-independence leadership, challenges of identities, and the position of women in society. These themes make African cinema stand out as predominantly social-realist and as committed to a social responsibility function (Diawara 1992:140–166). The political agenda remains strong even among the younger generation of filmmakers, among them Zola Maseko (South Africa), Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda (DRC), Léandre-Alain Baker (Congo), Newton Aduaka (Nigeria), Tunde Kelani (Nigeria), Zézé Gamboa (Angola), Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Cameroon), Moussa Sene Absa (Senegal) and Mama Keita (Guinea). These filmmakers are characterised by their experimentalist and individual styles which differ from the anthropological style prescribed and sponsored by Western festival organisers; their focus is on pan-African issues and the privileging of African audiences (Diawara 2010:74). The link between political and historical data is often strong in the fictional representations of filmmakers. In this regard the films, though works of art, can be used to appreciate the socio-cultural dynamics in these communities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, African filmmakers were united under the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI), a body through which to voice their concerns about the continent. In the view of Diawara (2010:97), the tendency among filmmakers today is

towards a multiplicity of voices and cinematic styles that are influenced and inflected by the filmmakers' geographical location in Africa, Europe, America; the politics of productions, intended audiences, festivals and distributions; and the filmmaker's individual approaches to film language.

The changes in culture, Africa's relationship with Western power blocs that were formerly her colonial masters, the reality of globalisation, cultural integrations



and migrations all work to continually define the concerns in both the form and content of African cinema. This makes the cinema's theoretical discourses complex and ongoing. Therefore, in terms of cinematic aesthetics, African cinema can be described as a cinema in search of itself as seen in the variety of emerging forms.

Evidently, African cinema shares common ground with world cinema. However, every world cinema is first a regional or national form of cultural expression as its raw material is often taken from the cultural context of the production. The aesthetic 'authenticity' of African cinema tends to draw from its rich oral and varied cultures as in other national cinemas (Tomaselli, Shepperson & Eke 1995). Because Africa is not a homogeneous entity, it is only expected to find varieties, both in content and form, in cinema although the continent is united by common experiences. African filmmakers often draw inspiration from the continent's rich oral tradition. This is not unique to Africa. All artists draw from their past, as TS Eliot (1921) articulates in 'Tradition and individual talents'. This makes every artistic production specific to a certain extent at least. This idea is echoed by the Burkinabé filmmaker, Gaston Kaboré, when he says in an interview with Pauline Bache (2008): 'I do believe personally that universality was born from specificity. You can be a citizen of the world, but you need to be from a land, because you have to bring your own part and then you can be enriched by other creations'. His films evidence the importance of history (tradition) in a work of art. Culturally specific films that tell borderless human stories can be authentic to the culture of its setting in terms of the language, the music, the arts, the food and the various cultural manifestations of a people (ibid).

Any attempt to tightly categorise African cinema is problematic. This is because of the dynamic nature of emergent forms. The tendencies manifested are thus neither irrefutable nor mutually exclusive. Genres are often mixed and overlapping. The dominant political and didactic overtones of cinema do not mean the exclusion of the popular and entertaining in the cinema. Indeed, the trend towards popular cinema runs through the work of Sembène, who is mostly associated with the didactic and committed cinematic tradition (Murphy 2000). Papaioannou (2009:143) also observes that this trend is evident, especially in Sembène's later films like *Faat Kiné* and *Moolaadé*. These critics rightly observe that popular humour underline even the most ideological and political of the films of most African filmmakers. This is because humour and entertainment are engrained in African storytelling aesthetics. Granted that African filmmaking is not entrenched in any one tradition, the familiar griot

tradition of storytelling has been well appropriated by African filmmakers to reflect contemporary situations.

## The griot tradition

The political theme and ideological role of cinema is evident in the films of the first generation of African filmmakers (Bisschoff 2009:444). The African filmmaker considers himself 'committed' to his society in the manner of the traditional griot, popularly referred to as the storyteller, poet and historian of the community. Ordinarily, the griot uses an art form that is familiar to the community to address a range of themes that are not only relevant to the community, but also equally accessible to the primary audience (Cham 1996:2). The filmmaker in this sense resembles the griot as he is situated in the community and shares some common ground with the primary audience (Priebe and Hale 1979:169–180).

As an artist, the filmmaker combines his idiosyncratic vision with his role as a significant member of the community. However, as both Diawara and Dubrah Gupta argue, distinct differences emerge between the filmmaker and the traditional griot. The griot is usually on the side of the hegemony and often reproduces the dominant history without challenging or interrogating it. The relationship between the griot and the ruling power is and has always been a complex one: he is often sought after by those in power because of his mastery of language that could be put to good use to validate the hegemonic group. The griot thus enjoyed the special patronage of the ruling group (Murphy 2000:55–57). The griot is, in the view of Gupta, a man without individuality, who simply chronicles the story of the community (Gupta 1994:11). The African filmmaker, on the other hand, sees himself as someone who critically appropriates the traditional role of the griot. He expresses himself by interpreting history and presenting it in an alternative way. He is often critical and challenges oppressive social structures. As Diawara puts it, he appropriates the traditional art form of the griot to often challenge the status quo: 'Where an oral narrative advocates a return to law and order at the end, the film version desires a new order to replace the old and stagnating one' (Diawara 1992:201). In alluding to the interpretive role of the filmmaker as a modern griot, Sembène sees his role as reaching beyond static documentation of history; he is involved in rewriting it with artistic vision:

[Cinema] serves as a canvas on which to reflect together with each other. What is important is that the cinema becomes eye, mirror and awareness. The film-maker is the one who looks at and observes his people to excerpt action and situations



which he chews over before giving them back to the people. Often the worker or the peasants don't have the time to pause on the details of their lives: they live them, and do not have the time to tie them down. The film-maker, though, can link one detail to another to put the story together. There is no longer a traditional storyteller in our days, and I think the film-maker can replace him. (Ghali 1987:46)

Like the traditional griot, Sembène underlines that he is not an 'individual' artist who uses an esoteric style that may be difficult to access by the primary audience – his community. In an interview with Françoise Pfaff (1995:126–127), he defines his role as, in a way, continuing the tradition of the griot:

The griot may only embellish reality during victorious times through what people call court songs or festive songs. In times of crisis, however, a griot does not embellish reality. On the contrary, he finds himself in the brutality of surrounding events. I have never tried to please my audience through the embellishment of reality. I am a participant, and an observer of my society.

The community, the artist and the film are linked. It is important for the audience to recognise themselves and their history in the cinematic representation and this should provoke them to ask questions about their own situation. It is in this vein that Sembène consistently maintains that '[a]ny kind of filmmaking by an African in any country is a political act, irrespective of the nature of the content' (Gupta 1994:9). Med Hondo (1996:40), whose approach is 'committed' in similar manner, sees cinema as an instrument for the 'construction of people's consciousness. [C]inema is the mechanism par excellence for penetrating the minds of our people, influencing their everyday social behaviour, directing them'. Sembène was particularly radical about the need for alternative representation of African (hi)stories. He often tapped into the unofficial, oral and popular stories resident in the memories of the community and he crafted these stories into his films. His films give voice to a significant section of community narratives that would otherwise have remained silent. His accounts often run counter to the official ones. In this way, the artist invites his audiences to look at their official history critically and to deconstruct it (Murphy 2000:46). Such is the case in a film like *Ceddo* (Senegal 1977) where official history and popular memory are in opposition. With such contentions, 'dominant narratives are forced to make room for different interpretations, to allow other, marginalised voices to speak out' (Murphy 2000:47). Because audiences are seen as active, the filmmaker's task is to string the narrative together in a manner that engages them.

Third Cinema with its political and Marxist slant was understandably appropriated by most of the filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s who focused on the political issues of emerging nations. This is a cinema of resistance



which underlines that a cultural product can subvert or exist independently within the dominant superstructure (Zacks 1999). However, this is not to say that films in other traditions were non-existent in Africa around the same time. Teshome Gabriel's explanation of the relationship between the filmmaker and the community in Third Cinema aesthetics is worth noting. His view of cinema, as an interactive memory machine that engages audiences in conversations with filmmakers and among audiences themselves, for a moment responded to African filmmakers' search for a theory (Gabriel 1989:53–64; Mahoso in Givanni 2000:201). Third Cinema is a nomenclature coined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to distinguish this kind of 'alternative cinema' from mainstream Hollywood and auteur cinema. It is described as 'guerrilla cinema' that struggles against the cultural hegemony of Hollywood cinema. It is political, revolutionary and polemical in content and form. It is an oppositional cinema in terms of its efforts to raise the consciousness of its primary audience, mainly Third World people, to think and act in culturally assertive ways. This theory views the camera as a 'gun' used to defend Third World people's cultural identities. Third Cinema theory advocates an independent national cinema that is produced away from hegemonic control by and for Third World people (Gabriel 1989:30–51; Willemen 1989:10–22; Ukadike 1994:98; Lott 1995:50; Tomaselli 1995:130).

The fire of this 'revolutionary' cinema, in the context of Africa, did not quite 'inflamm' audiences to make the needed changes in their nations. This is a challenge for an alternative cinema that set out to challenge bourgeois elitism, but has paradoxically remained exclusive as festival cinema (Chanan 1997). Because African (art) cinema has been predominantly dependent on the West for its production, exhibition and distribution, it is caught up in the hegemonic structure and uses the highbrow film formats (35mm camera) that is acceptable to the mainstream. This expensive format is not quite in keeping with the original idea of Third Cinema – a cinema that operated underground and, unlike the auteur cinema, was produced by a group. Solanas and Getino's first film *La Horade los Hornos* (Hour of the Furnaces, 1968), which was driven by the desire for self-expression outside the standard form and for remaining unassimilated by the hegemony, is what makes this kind of cinema stand out in opposition to Hollywood. The feature of Third Cinema as an 'imperfect' cinema that is more interested in ideological communication and self-determination than in artistic excellence is not quite like the African films that are lauded at international festivals as great works of art.

In the context of Africa, implementing Third Cinema aesthetics has been difficult although filmmakers like Sembène, Hondo, Haile Gerima and Cheick



Oumar Sissoko produce consciousness-raising films. Because the masses who are the primary audiences of these films have not had access to these films, the cinema's capacity to cause a 'revolution' cannot be proved in this case (McNamara 2011). The politics of production, distribution and marketing make it difficult for these films to be accessed. This applies in particular to the first generation of African art films, shot on 35mm film that were almost all produced, exhibited, distributed and marketed through support from the West (Diawara 1992: 2010). This, in practice, is far from what Third Cinema aesthetics advocate. African art cinema has turned out to be dependent on the West in these significant areas and has thus alienated national audiences as these films have remained inaccessible in the nation states of production. Solanas and Getino presented Third Cinema as a theory in the process of becoming. They later revised it to emphasise certain aspects of the theory, especially the importance of context in applying it. This shows the impossibility of universalising the principles of Third Cinema without regard to specific contexts. Theorists agree that the national contexts and the popular cultures of the people must be taken into account since the value of theory is tested on the terrain of praxis (Chanan 1997).

Although the scope of this book does not include popular commercial films, I make brief comments on this format as it comes closer to the idea of alternative, independent cinema of the people, by the people, and for the people. Nollywood films do not only subvert Hollywood's standards, but also that of the 'official' African cinema that does not hold Nollywood in high regard (Bisschoff 2009). Yet Nollywood makes its point by satisfying the hunger of Africans to look at their own images and tell their own stories. The video format is popular, accessible, and inexpensive to produce and resonates with the needs of the people as is seen in the replication of this format in other parts of Africa. Although 'mainstream' African cinema privileges to be a cinema of liberation, it has remained largely colonised in its mode of production that is heavily dependent on the West. Nollywood has given agency to African storytellers, most of whom have not attended Western film schools. It is this kind of film that is diffusely seen in the continent as 'African cinema', whereas the aesthetically correct African cinema that I analyse in this book is more found at international film festivals. I thus agree with Chanan that the home video film tradition offers an opportunity for the growth and application of Third Cinema, or third television, as he calls it (Chanan 1997). In its popular and often melodramatic formats, this model responds to audience's needs and has proved to be a cultural stronghold for Africans beyond the borders of Nigeria (Haynes & Okome 1998; Larkin 2004; Dipio 2008; Adesokan 2009; Becker 2011). It has found a niche in continuing the rich and folkloric tradition of storytelling in a digital era, balancing the

prime functions of art – to entertain and educate. Granted, the ‘political’ nature of this popular film is different from Sembène’s or Hondo’s, but this does not make Nollywood apolitical since it nudges audiences across Africa toward self-definition.

## Individual and popular traditions

The focus on politics is a dominant paradigm especially for the first generation of African filmmakers. Djibril Diop Mambéty and Moussa Sene Absa from Senegal; Mwezé Ngangura from the Democratic Republic of Congo; Jean-Pierre Bekolo from the Cameroon; and Idrissa Ouédraogo, Gaston Kaboré and Daniel Kollo Sanou from Burkina Faso are examples of those who are not overly political in their approaches. Despite adopting popular, comic and ‘apolitical’ modes, the issues they address are no less significant than those addressed in overtly political cinema. The variety of forms and aesthetics employed by these filmmakers show how challenging it is to compartmentalise African cinema. Genres coalesce and cross borders. For instance, such diversity in style is evident in Mambéty’s non-linear and fragmented styled films like *Touki Bouki* (Senegal 1973) and the parabolic *Hynes* (Senegal 1992), and more recent futurist films like Sylvestre Amoussou’s *Africa Paradis* (Benin 2006), set in 2033 and reversing the migration trend from Africa to the West. In the film, Europeans struggle to obtain visas in search of jobs in the United States of Africa. Similarly, Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes* (Cameroon 2005), set in 2025, employs comedy in analysing gender politics and the desire of two female protagonists to ‘punish’ men by flaunting their sex appeal in the faces of the powerful, corrupt and sexually obsessed men in the community.

Diversity of style is thus what marks African cinema right from the start. This is evident in the differences in the film styles of Sembène, fondly referred to as the father of African cinema; Mambéty, also from Senegal; and the filmmaker, Moustapha Alassane from Niger, who started making films in the 1960s, just like Sembène. Although filmmakers ascribe to community identities, they are principally individual artists. Bekolo articulates this concern when he comments on the semi-documentary, slow-paced, naturalistic and minimal style of storytelling that characterises many francophone African films of the 1980s and the early 1990s. He describes himself as an artist who does not sacrifice his individuality for the interest of the community. He expresses impatience with those who see African filmmakers as a block speaking for a unifocal community. On the making of his film *Aristotle’s Plot* (Cameroon 1996), which focuses on the absurd in life, he comments:



It is true that there are specialists on Africa all over the world serving as its mouthpiece, but hardly do we hear individual African voices themselves. I am very individualistic, indeed I do exist. I think it's very important that people in Africa exist as individuals and not always through the community or the group. The film attempts to tell my own story; to convey my own perception of cinema, express my point of view, and define my own vision. (Eke, Harrow & Yewah 2000:25)

He challenges the view that the artist must be like a griot who sacrifices his individuality in order to represent his community. A filmmaker like Kaboré, though interested in reflecting the history of his community, does so in a more non-combative manner than Sembène, Hondo and Sissoko, for instance. The difference between the combative and non-combative filmmakers, both of who are committed to the causes of the continent and humanity, should not be hierarchically judged. African filmmaking does not have to be bound to one tradition.

The variety in African filmmaking demonstrates that Third Cinema aesthetics cannot contain the diversity and individuality of the filmmakers. The attractions of Third Cinema can be understood in the context of the political urge to assert what Ella Shohat (in Givanni 2000:123) calls 'Third Worldist nationalism'. In the postcolonial and postmodern era, the direct fight against colonialism and assertion of nationalism is no longer a strong creative impetus for African filmmakers, because:

In an era of 'multinationalism' and 'globalisation', Third Worldist ideology no longer plays the same political role. The early period of Third Worldist euphoria has now given way to the collapse of communism, the in-definite postponement of the tri-continental revolution and the realisation that the 'Wretched of the Earth... are not unanimously revolutionary and not necessarily allied to one another, the appearance of an array of Third World despots, and the recognition that international geopolitics and the global economic systems have forced even socialist regimes to be incorporated into transnational capitalism (ibid).

Third Cinema aesthetics presupposes homogeneity among Third World peoples and nations. Yet the reality is, even in a single nation, heterogeneity in terms of social classes, groups and gender are evident. What is progressively emerging in the African film scenery is 'the multiplicity of voices within the complex boundaries of the nation state' (Shohat 2000:124). This makes Third Cinema a contestable aesthetic for the iconography of African cinema as a whole, although its influence is palpable in some of the films discussed in this book.

## Challenges of categorising African cinema

African film scholars like Gabriel, Diawara and Férid Boughedir have often attempted to define cinema by categorising it and distinguishing it from Western, mainstream cinema. Gabriel (1982), using a neo-Marxist angle, categorises cinema into three phases: unqualified assimilation (films that ape Hollywood), remembrance (indigenous films with folkloric features) and combative (films that function as ideological instruments of liberation). Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes (1993) have, in their categorisation, tended to focus more on the discussion of the content of individual films than on the political issues in the production of films. Diawara's (1992) three categories are: social realism (popular films with high entertainment value), return to source (non-polemical, mythical film focusing on precolonial Africa distinct from the postcolonial situation), and colonial confrontation (similar to Gabriel's combative phase). Boughedir's (in Givanni 2000) classification foregrounds the conflicts between old and new, and modern and traditional. Other attempts at distinguishing different kinds of African cinema privilege its corollary: the audience question (Prescod 2000:79). What has emerged from these discussions is the realisation that since the cinema is not unitary, it is impossible to spell out what it 'should' and 'should not' be. Both the language and cinematic aesthetics should emerge from the specific context of production.

The question of whether African filmmaking requires an iconography or film language of its own remains contentious to practitioners and critics. Diawara does not believe in the need for an 'authentic' African film language, whether this is defined in terms of the common experience of struggles against imperialism or the common identity of being Africans. Even within the same country, one cannot expect uniformity in the cinematic aesthetics employed by filmmakers. The political culture in a country, the ideological stances of the filmmakers, the cultural differences and the production mode in a region determine the film language (Diawara 2000:81). It would be erroneous, therefore, to speak of a monolithic African film aesthetic, just as one cannot sweepingly speak of a European film aesthetic. As an art form, cinema's basic aesthetics are borderless. Diawara's view, which I agree with, is corroborated by Minh-ha and Burton (in Zacks 1999) who underline the importance of critically analysing the film text in order to retrieve what is 'authentic' in it, rather than restricting it to a category of its own. Setting African cinema apart from the West in order to define it as unique does not make sense, especially as most African filmmakers have themselves been trained in film schools in the West. Hybridity – both cultural and intellectual – is the mark of our global civilisation. Hamid Naficy



highlights the same problem of categorising even ‘national cinemas’. Often this is done without due consideration for the diversity of films that exist in the same country (Naficy 2008:97). In the context of a young film tradition as is found in black Africa, any form of categorisation will soon crumble as new forms and genres continue to emerge. Categorisations of African cinema based on the above categories are restrictive, often leaving undefined new and emerging forms. A theory based on analysis of specific film texts, as I have tried to do in this book, takes us closer to defining the characteristics of African cinema.

Nonetheless, as John Akomfrah reminds us, the fact that there is a body of cinema referred to as ‘African’ indicates that there are some traits that run through the continent’s cinema. This too can be verified by close analysis as scholars who have attempted broad categorisations such as Third Cinema aesthetics in response to pan-Africanist ideals have tended to do. According to Akomfrah (in Givanni 2009:90), ‘[t]he most successful films which work with a broadly pan-African agenda appear...to be one in which the general and the particular operate in a state of creative tension’. This is not to say that there is something completely other or ‘authentic’ about African cinema, but rather to underline those specific characteristics that African cinema brings to the rubrics of world cinema. The individual features that derive from the specificities of each county or region also embed the marks of universality. As the debates about the identity of African cinema continue, engagement with concrete analysis of film takes us closer to defining cinema. This, in part, is the task of this book.

### **The issue of women**

The beginning of African filmmaking, just as its literary counterpart, can be described as a protest against the images of Africa by ‘expatriate’ European and American artists. This initially made African artists see their roles as one of ‘decolonising’ the gaze and freeing the African image (wa Thiong’o 1994). This protest was against the stereotypical and reductive images of an Africa without individuality. The African was often absent from the spotlight and, if at all present, was part of the bizarre and exotic objects that challenge Western heroisms. When the African played a role at all, it was that of servility, without distinct personality. The African landscape, animals and humans were represented as static and wild, albeit mysterious and fascinating – a land of the enigmatic, barbarity and myth, suited for safari hunts and the enjoyment of the quaint. The entire continent is simplified and reduced to ‘gibberish’ language that is unidentifiable on the continent. The emphasis is to present the African humanity as different from the Westerner (Cameron 1994:17–56). Decolonising

the mind in its comprehensive sense includes the filmmaker entering into respectful dialogue with the community in all its sectors, including women (Bakari in Givanni 2000:14; Gabriel in Givanni 2000:102; wa Thiong'o in Givanni (2000:93).

African cinema's conscious identity was shaped by the colonial experience. Emerging in the 1960s, a time most African nations achieved their political independence, cinema positioned itself as a postcolonial art form, a kind of political platform for self-expression. The production of Sembène's short film *Borom Sarret* (The Cart Driver, 1963) allowed what became the dominant thematic concerns of African cinema to emerge. This deceptively simple film tells the story of an ordinary, kind-hearted man who makes a living as a cart driver in restricted areas in Dakar. The city and its ethics are new to the cart driver who sentimentally responds to a griot who chants his praises and lauds his 'noble' ancestry. He gives the griot his hard-earned coin and receives showers of blessings and praises in return. The cart driver's kith and kin expect rides in his cart without paying and he is not hard-hearted enough to press them to pay even when he is disappointed that they have not paid him. The people who take advantage of the cart driver include the Western-educated class that frequent the exclusive middle-class residential area. The police confiscate his cart for trespassing on private property when he gives a lift to a man from a higher social class than him. The cart driver returns home empty-handed, having lost the only coin in his possession to the corrupt police officer. His disappointed wife then hands him their baby and leaves home, after promising there will be food in the house.

In this first African film<sup>1</sup> the 'woman's' story, embedded within the main narrative, is introduced as challenging and disrupts the status quo. The film's narrative closure opens to the theme of the African woman caught between traditions and changing times. Without waiting to be invited, the 'impatient' woman grabs the opportunity to become an agent in understanding and addressing their common economic challenges as a family. In *Borom Sarret* Sembène introduces what later becomes a mantra in his films: the African man and woman should fight on the same front in overcoming poverty. This stance echoes the African feminist ideal where both genders are united in the class struggle to live decently. Feminists like Ogunyemi (1985), Emecheta (in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) have sought to redefine and mark their concerns as different from Western and African-American concerns, despite their shared sisterhood. Their position is neither oppositional to men nor do they advocate adversarial gender politics. Class struggle often foregrounds



patriarchy as is the case in *Borom Sarret*. Here Sembène starts the African feminist discourse of how men and women complement each other in the search for decent living in the postcolonial era. This coincides with the ethics of African feminism that is characterised as ‘distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with “bread, butter and power” issues’ (Mikell 1997:4). The qualitative difference between a woman and a man is the new burst of energy a woman brings that has not yet been adequately used to address their common problems. When the cart driver, the traditional breadwinner in this context, returns home without food, the woman offers to take charge in what superficially appears to be role reversal. In leaving the film open-ended, Sembène invites audiences to engage in discussions about gender roles. The idea of rigidity in gender roles is questioned. The role of the ‘new African woman’ extends beyond the domestic sphere. From the initial scripting of the woman’s story within the story in *Borom Sarret* a filmmaker like Joseph Gaï Ramaka, in *Karmen Gei* (Senegal 2001), uses a female protagonist to explore the delicate issue of sexuality in the African context. Karmen Gei, the mythically seductive sensual protagonist, is portrayed as a femme fatale, with chaotic sexual energies that fall outside the bounds of the ethos of society. She along with her male and female lovers die at the end of the film. Karmen’s irresistible energy is portrayed as destructive. Her death and that of those involved with her imply that society is not prepared to accommodate this ‘aberrant’ sort of sexuality. Nonetheless, the film opens this subject for discussion.

The social-cultural contexts of the films are important in my analysis because the filmmaker is inserted within specific contexts and the experiences reflected in the films often fuse with the lived experiences of the portrayed communities. In the main, the relationship between the filmmaker, the community and the audience is important in a cinema that considers itself to be committed to a socio-political cause. It is a triangular relationship where the filmmaker is at once ‘the listener [and] the audience, and the community is the teacher and communicator. There are also stages where the filmmaker is the communicator and the community the audience’ (Mahaso in Givanni 2000:201). It therefore follows that African artists, whether writers or filmmakers, cannot claim to be neutral in their works. Of necessity they respond to the social forces operating in the contexts of their productions. It is in this context that the artist is examined as the mirror or conscience of society. Their main function is to mirror, not to mystify reality. For this matter, African art is predominantly functional and its main role is to attune itself to popular audience reception (Owoo in Givanni 2000:230–231). The issues African cinema represents are broad and range

from significant historical, colonial and postcolonial events to the everyday experiences of ordinary people. It is important that audiences ‘see themselves’ in the films and engage with them (Attia in Givanni, 2001:227). Gender being an important facet of social relations, the filmmaker represents the terrains of these relationships.

Gabriel’s (2000:99) reference to cinema as ‘memories’, ‘experiences’, ‘dreams’, ‘myths’ and ‘spirits that hover beyond and between the images’ is relevant to my analysis of the representation of gender relations with specific reference to women in African cinema. Gabriel uses his experience of returning to his country, Ethiopia, after 32 years to comment on the role of women as the forgotten custodians and dynamic transmitters of African cultural and historical heritage. This idea emerged from his encounter with his mother on this event of his homecoming when she presented him with two gifts she had carefully kept for over 30 years. These were a clay cup and a photograph of Gabriel with Emperor Haile Selassie, taken when he was still a youth in university. These invaluable, tangible gifts triggered memories of the past, stretching far beyond the 32 years of his absence from home. He saw his mother’s gift and cinema as synonymous gifts of memory. The clay cup that he used as a child activated memories from his personal experience of being connected to his ancestral land and his mother, while the photograph with the emperor evoked a shared memory with members of his nation-state.

Both cinema and women are custodians and transmitters of memories passed on to the next generation. Although these memories are made up of tangible cultural products, they are also experiences that are fluid and transformable as the contexts of their interpretation and use may dictate. The fluidity of experience as memory shows that women as custodians of memory should not be perceived as trapped in a static past. Indeed, through the two symbolic gifts (the clay cup and the photograph) that his mother gave him, Gabriel realised how the modern and the traditional, the West and Africa are embedded in these gifts that reflect the experience of the African woman as complex and dynamic, defying a single definition. He sees both cinema and women as gifts in the sense of ‘passing on’ the cultural legacy of a community in vibrant ways. His call to the African filmmaker is to embrace the non-static gift of cinema to tell the vivacious stories of African women as custodians and transmitters of the community’s heirlooms. Paradoxically, women are often excluded from the narratives of the nation state. Gabriel (in Givanni 2000:101) argues:

In many narratives of nations, it is the women who are symbolically the nation; the bearers of tradition and culture, and the repositories of social and historical memories



and its spiritual energy. The nation is the people. What is missing, and needs restoration in the picture, is the 'invisible woman', who in being the outsider, has always remained the African insider. As they say, 'she is the unsung who makes the song'.

Through his experience with his mother Gabriel understood that the woman's story, or any other story, cannot be told from the perspective of a preconceived and stereotypical 'script'; it must be born out of experience, which is by its nature non-static.

African filmmakers who adapt alternative perspectives to Hollywood take charge of both the 'gaze and the voice' in telling their stories (Diawara 2010:95). Sembène is a radical example of a filmmaker who represents versions of stories from oral and popular traditions in the community. His films often invest women with agency, meriting him acclaim as a 'feminist' male (Diawara 2010:161). Indeed, although the general view of feminists is that the male perspective falls short in representing the experiences of women, Flora Nwapa (2007:532) acknowledges Sembène and Peter Abrahams as being some of the few male African artists who go beyond stereotypes and represent women in more balanced ways. Using art as an alternative knowledge base, filmmakers often question the status quo in an effort to create space for the marginalised. Without claiming to adopt a comprehensive feminist critical stance, I have, whenever appropriate, integrated views of African feminists in my analysis of the films. In the following section, I highlight the key tenets of African feminism.

## African feminism

Feminist critical film theories have proliferated since the 1960s in an effort to address the representation of women in film. Different brands of feminism have been produced and developed in diverse cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, no single feminist theory can claim to speak for all women at all times since women are 'fractured by power differences along lines of class, race, and sexual orientations; and women can no longer line up so easily with "other oppressed peoples"' (Thornham 1999:1). Nonetheless, all forms of feminism are unified by their shared political stance for the emancipation of women's resources for the wellbeing of society. Patriarchy has been identified by most feminists as an established institution that stands in the way of women's liberation. Every theory of feminism, in one way or another, is committed to examining and explaining the social relationship between men and women, the roles, the status and the position they occupy, as well as gender and power relationships within society. What moves all feminists is the desire to improve the conditions of women in society (Cirksena & Cuklanz 1992:18). However,

gender scholars caution against generalised and universalist discourses that, in the name of sisterhood, skew the specific and historical contexts within which women are defined (Oyewumi 1997). Even in the context of Africa itself, it is difficult to speak of a unitary woman.

African feminist discourses, particularly those in the literary tradition, are centred on patriarchy as the dominant ideology oppressive to women. Certain aspects of their views on the representation of women in popular art are similar to that of Western feminists: that a male artist predominantly represents female characters in stereotypical manners as the ‘other’ and they are a design of his fantasy, incongruent with a ‘real’ woman. In their view, male artists have failed to represent the genuine concerns of women. Women’s voices are either erased from narrative action or romanticised beyond recognition. The female artist then sees her task as that of bringing female consciousness into the mainstream (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:2). These feminists argue that although women in African societies have been associated with storytelling, their voices are erased or, at best, are on the periphery in the study of African literature where male authors have long dominated.

Ama Ata Aidoo, one of the first African female writers, identifies tradition as one of the forces holding women back. In her view, ghettoising women’s writing and writing on women in ‘special issues’ continues the trend of the negative attitude of publishers and critics towards female writing (Aidoo in Olaniyan 2007:513–519). However, such a mindset is not limited to the experiences of African women. Maaike Meijer points out a similar pattern in the way European male critics tend to respond to women’s writing, which they often treat as ‘other’ and inferior. Meijer contends that even literary criticism is predominantly male and the enunciation paradoxically focuses on the male critic more than on the female artist’s work. It creates ‘symbolical masculine power and the often hidden gendered literary values that relegate women to ‘their place’ (Meijer in Buikema & van der Tuin 2009:236). These discourses on the politics of production show that the female artist’s work (for both Western and African feminists) does not seem to attract comparative critical attention to that of male artists. This point also occurs in relation to African cinema when Beatriz Leal Riesco (2011) comments on the paucity of critical attention given to films directed by women in comparison to those directed by men. She notes that in Diawara’s book *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010) only four of the 31 films selected for the book and DVD project were by female directors and even their works received scanty comment; they appear as footnotes in relation to the comprehensive treatment of work by male directors.



The continued marginalisation, and at times exclusion of women, evidently deserves attention. As Diawara (2010:161) himself maintains, it is not enough for 'feminist' male directors like Sembène to speak for women; female directors need to be affirmed to creatively express their concerns.

Although African female filmmakers of international acclaim, such as Safi Faye (Senegal), Fanta Régina Nacro (Burkina Faso) and Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe) exist, they are still very much a minority in terms of the volume of production and access to the means of production that cannot match male directors. Most African female filmmakers are involved in video and domestic television production, documentaries and short films (Schmidt 1999:292–299). According to Kenneth Harrow, Faye, one of the first black African female filmmakers, is herself caught up in the established male order in her representation of women's problems (Harrow 1999:231–232). He claims that her call to women to share equal power with men, to be educated and to be self-reliant is often made without questioning and challenging the oppressive social structure which is the root of their marginalisation. Harrow's general comment calls for a more critical analysis of the body of films by female directors to appreciate their contextual representations of female subjectivities.

I envision such a research project as a sequel to this one that seeks to first understand how the woman is framed within dominant male direction and to recognise the gaps where they exist. The choice of male directors was imperative when the research for this book was initiated. The dearth of a body of female-directed films in circulation compelled me to limit the initial research to male directors who are truly representative of African filmmaking. My focus on them is not through disregard for female directors, but to closely analyse how the dominant, masculine filmmaking tradition conceptualises gender issues and positions women within postcolonial cinema's decolonising of the African story and image. My analysis thus puts the male director to the test in reflecting gender relations in the continent's changing contexts. The male filmmaker, mostly with finances from the West, is the predominant producer and circulator of African images. There are not only much fewer female directors, but they also have greater hurdles to overcome ranging from economic, social and attitudinal obstacles as interviews with female filmmakers like Valerie Kaboré, Anne Mungai, and Tsitsi Dangarembga show (Cham 1994; Harding 1997; Ellerson 2000; Pailey 2006).

The popularly contested images of African women include the idealisation of the archetypal woman as mother, often treated synonymously with Mother Africa. Ennobling as this image may be, Nfah-Abbenyi draws attention to the

trap such an idealisation presents. The mother's transcendence, fertility, silence and praiseworthiness have the effect of entrenching her subordination and changelessness when she is perceived as the static element in culture (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:5). In the view of Laretta Ngcobo (2007), the ennobled image of motherhood represented in art by male artists is more of a myth than reality. Respect for motherhood is linked to the woman's role as child-bearer for the community rather than for her as an individual. The woman often performs this formidable role of motherhood from the outside as she remains marginalised all her life. The power of patriarchal ideology is so encompassing that, in spite of her awareness, no single woman 'is able to shift the power of tradition. Abandoning certain practices in tradition does nothing much to shift the embedded attitudes of African men' (Ngcobo 2007:540). A deconstruction of the images of women, in Ngcobo's view, reveals a form of martyrdom endured in silence and in conformity. These feminist observations are particularly pertinent to my reading of the representation of archetypal mother images in films like Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* (Mali 1987) and Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and *Tilai* (Burkina Faso 1986 and 1990).

Another contested angle of male representation of female characters is the woman as a whore, especially when she is portrayed in a non-traditional context. These two dominant stereotypes, African feminists argue, leave women's images fixed within male fantasy. Nawal El Saadawi's (2007) research on the representation of women in Arab literature by male authors authenticates this. In her analysis she examines the two female paradigms of the 'mother' and the 'female'. While the Arab male author gives the mother an ennobled image, he separates the mother from the female, who is treated as inconsequential. Within the category of female, the male author is scared of and at the same time fascinated by the educated woman. This is the woman, El Saadawi maintains, who receives the worst treatment in fictional representation. The male author would rather she remains behind the veil than share public spaces with him (El Saadawi 2007:520–525). These two stereotypes, within which women seem to be trapped in fiction, are far removed from the complex, real woman. Patriarchy is resistant to change, especially when women try to challenge the status quo. Speaking of the Islamic and Arab contexts, Nadia Hijab argues that where women are given many rights, freedoms and respect, they are often further removed from liberation as Islam 'protects the Muslim woman who is decent and who respects her home, her husband and children. Islam does not give rights to the woman who rebels and who ... leaves her husband's home and refuses to return' (Hijab 1988:33). This is patriarchy's way of integrating the majority of women



into the hegemonic structure and isolating the rebellious ones. It is a device that perpetuates the great female silence that patriarchy needs to succeed.

It is in this regard that Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's argument centres on the power of patriarchy to peg women to traditions as custodians and primary transmitters of social values – a position that makes it difficult for them to extricate themselves from tradition's oppressive clutches. In this position, women appear to be working against themselves in a dynamic cultural context where everything is in flux; the patriarchal head of the family is also engulfed by this change. Patriarchal society's security seems to rest on the woman remaining trapped in the past and holding on firmly to traditional heritage. Ogundipe-Leslie identifies six 'mountains' which hold African women down. Some of these are particular to African women, while others encompass the shared experiences of once-colonised communities. These are: oppressive machinery from outside; traditional heritage from within; the woman's own backwardness as a result of years of exclusion; male domination within society; the woman's race and class within the economic international order; and most importantly, the woman's own perception of herself (Ogundipe-Leslie 1984:35–36). From Ogundipe-Leslie's perspective, African feminists see the African woman as living in double 'colonisation' both within patriarchal hegemony and as a colonial subject. Try as he may, the male artist, feminists argue, cannot adequately represent women's experiences.

Sheila Petty (1996) who has written on gender in African filmmaking argues that in challenging the Western perspective of Africa, the male filmmaker, especially in the 1980s, tended to foreground the pan-Africanist and decolonisation agenda and in this process often sacrificed or conflated the female agenda. Her concern here is that the female agenda, which is often situated within the domestic sphere, is not given due attention in the interest of the public sphere and nationalist concerns. It is often peripheral and lost in the 'bigger' issues of the nation state. Granted this is a tendency in films of the 1980s, a filmmaker like Ousmane Sembène consistently demonstrates interest in the issues of women in their everyday domestic lives. This concern becomes even more explicit in films like *Faat Kiné* (Senegal 2001) and *Moolaadé* (Senegal 2004) where women are the protagonists. Moussa Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (Senegal 2002) and Dani Kouyaté's *Sia le Rêve du Python* (Burkina Faso 2001) are examples of films of the 2000s that use different styles to tell the diverse stories of women. In terms of role allocation, the African woman's story occupies significant space in these filmmakers' concerns. Her story appears to have become more inspiring and can no longer be ignored by a continent seeking holistic development. This

too corresponds to the social context as powerful women are becoming more pervasive in society and actively involved in public roles. However, more of the woman's story still calls for narrative attention.

Putting the nature of women's struggle for equity in perspective, Gwendolyn Konie comments on the difficult nature of women's struggle for equity that is primarily waged in the family when she argues that 'equal rights between the sexes is bound to prove even more difficult than that of de-colonisation because in essence it is a struggle between husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother' (in Davies & Graves 1990:8). While men and women are united in the struggle against colonialism, women are often isolated on the gender front for equity as this issue is often trivialised as unnecessary in the face of larger concerns facing the African continent. This is expressed in the Malawian poet, Felix Mnthali's tongue-in-cheek poem, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend', cited by Ogundipe-Leslie. The persona in the poem implies that the feminist appeal is a luxury for an African woman who should take her rightful place beside the man in fighting against the more serious ills plaguing society. The male persona minimises the concerns of feminism and reduces it to sharing in the cooking and changing nappies. These are certainly insignificant matters in the African context. He sees feminism as a foreign idea from the West that has come between the hitherto 'harmonious' relationship between the African man and woman (Ogundipe-Leslie 1984:545–546). This is a typical trap for male intellectuals who tend to dismiss feminist discourse as irrelevant in the face of other societal challenges. They believe the African woman should engage with this 'luxury' only after all the other ills have been remedied. This would certainly mean waiting forever.

In seeking to distinguish themselves from Western feminists, African feminists note that the essential demands of feminism did not begin with the official declaration of the movement of the 1960s. African history has numerous examples of strong women who have challenged their oppression and marginalisation under patriarchy in a bid to create greater spaces for self-expression and liberty for themselves. The International Women's Movement has simply helped to provide

one of the spaces where many different drums can be beaten to many different tunes at the same time. Consequently, women in Africa and in the Diaspora can use the space as a place where they can beat their own drums as well, where they can send out and receive their own messages. (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:11)

Thus while African feminists acknowledge their solidarity with the International Women's Movement, they recognise that the specific realities on the African



continent call for a different emphasis in the application of feminist principles. They first call upon African women and men to recognise their common struggle to remove the yoke of race and class oppression that affect them both.

Secondly, African feminists address the issue of women's position in society historically, seeking to enlarge the role women can play in society. They give historical evidence of the competence of women at different levels of participation in the public sphere. Historical figures of women warriors, rulers and priestesses are represented to show that the limited social roles women play in contemporary Africa does not indicate their capacity to contribute to society (Diop 1978). Therefore, these feminists call for equal opportunities for both genders.

Thirdly, African feminists are committed to the critical examination of social institutions that should promote women's wellbeing and eradicate those that are oppressive, exploitative and disrespectful to women. The role of a woman as a mother is valued, but institutions that define women only in terms of their motherhood, leaving no room for single or childless women, are rejected. The position of women within polygamous marriages is examined for its advantages and disadvantages for women may be dominated under both polygamy and monogamy (Nwapa 2007:526–532).

Fourthly, African feminists are committed to the welfare of most African women who are socially, politically and economically marginalised. They seek to create opportunities for self-reliance and networking among women and thus clearly reject the concept of 'muledom' (Emecheta in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:7).

The general view among feminists that male artists are not equipped to portray a solid, social-realist female character was, in African filmmaking, translated into the Mama Africa Short Film project that gave female filmmakers the opportunity to articulate the continent's situations from the perspectives of women. These women's shorts present a wide range of topics affecting particularly women in their everyday activities. The films include Fanta Régina Nacro's *A Close-up on Bintou* (Burkina Faso 2001), about a woman who, despite the ridicule of her husband, starts a business which eventually makes her financially self-sufficient and changes her husband's negative attitude towards women's economic independence as she improves the lives of the entire family. Ingrid Sinclair's *Riches* (Zimbabwe/South Africa 2001) is set in apartheid South Africa and tells the story of a school teacher's search for identity in a community that is not keen to embrace her. These and other short films by award-winning filmmakers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, who expresses clear feminist awareness in several of her short films, show the sensitivity female artists bring to their

crafting of female experiences. For instance, in *Kware Kware Svako: Mother's Day* (Zimbabwe 2004) that draws its inspiration from a folktale, Dangarembga presents a contemporary narrative of how a mother makes the ultimate sacrifice in a hunger-stricken family. She metaphorically becomes food for her husband. This story of woman's sacrifice is told with shocking sensitivity. Similarly, in *Growing Stronger* (Zimbabwe 2005) she tells the story of Tendayi, a beautiful woman, who lives positively with HIV and becomes a source of inspiration for others in similar situations. In her filmmaking, Dangarembga is constantly aware of the two fronts of race and gender on which she and other African women battle. In an interview with Robtel Pailey (2006), she comments:

Gender matters to me because I am a woman and experience firsthand [sic] the oppressive consequences of gender discrimination. I spend a lot of my considerable energy fighting that... I experience similar oppression as an African person.

My analysis in this book focuses on the quality of female presence and voice in the selected films and the space their struggles against oppressive patriarchy occupy among the concerns of male filmmakers. Issues concerning women may be represented in ways that challenge the establishment, leave it unchallenged or take a negotiating middle ground. The continuity and discontinuity in the representational range given to women in relation to men and their efforts to reinforce or break traditional gender paradigm scenarios occupies significant analytical attention. In the context of African cinema, the major trope or form of 'fetish' that replaces the scopophilic gaze on the woman as an object of desire, that Laura Mulvey<sup>2</sup> (1991:19) writes about in Western cinema, is the idealisation of the woman as Mother (Oyewumi 1997; Nzegwu 2011). This is the most reassuring archetype in the representation of women in African cinema. I analyse the discourses operating in the films to reveal whether filmmakers are introducing alternative discourses within the dominant organising ideology – patriarchy. I examine the changing faces of hegemonic patriarchy and woman's confidence in using the 'freedoms' that are theoretically theirs as well as men's courage to renounce institutions that purportedly privilege them. How filmmakers garner support for the woman's causes, either through individual characters or social institutions, is examined to lead to generalisations on how they envision gendered relations.

Elizabeth Cowie (1997:3–4) identifies three interrelated issues that arise in the representation of women in film. The first is the social definition of women. How are women defined in a particular society? Is their definition limited only to their traditional gender roles? The second is the perspective of



identity. Does the woman experience her identity as something imposed from the outside and therefore resists it or is it an image that she recognises, accepts and appropriates? In other words, how do women respond to the definitions given them by the society in which they function? Thirdly, Cowie underlines identity construction as a process and not as a fixed achievement. This makes the search for female identity through imaging an ongoing and shifting experience. The gender images in the films analysed are certainly not fixed. Cinema is a carrier of cultural values and myths and the representation of gender relations mirror how men and women are viewed in society (Thornham 1999:10). This corresponds to Noel Carroll's (1996) understanding of cinema as a transmitter of 'paradigm scenarios'. Paradigm scenarios are the emotional responses society builds around persons or objects as a result of repeated exposure to the same images. These emotions are reinforced through different cultural forms: formal education, stories, films and traditional beliefs. In the same way, the audience's emotional response to gender may be shaped by the paradigm scenario that they bring to bear on the films they watch. Carroll (1996:268) states that:

Paradigm scenarios may be derived from films, or, more likely, films may reflect, refine, and reinforce paradigm scenarios already aboard in the culture. One way to construe the study of the image of women in film is an attempt to isolate widely disseminated paradigm scenarios that contribute to the shaping of emotional responses to women.

There is, thus, a dialectical give-and-take relationship between what the film image gives to society and what it takes from society and reflects back to it. In this sense, this book analyses the main paradigm scenarios associated with gender images in African cinema.

## **Selected films and book structure**

The films I have selected span from the 1970s to the 2000s. The selection was determined by the significant presence of three main categories of women: the girl child, the young woman and the grandmother and the various roles they play. Films from North Africa (the Maghreb) and South Africa are excluded from this analysis because in terms of film history, economic development and cultural diversity, these regions stand out as different from the rest of black Africa south of the Sahara. My choice of films also privileges francophone Africa as 'canonical' African filmmakers come from this part of black Africa. Even after their political independence, France's interest in the cultural affairs of their former colonies continued through the promotion of the production of ethnographic-anthropological films by African filmmakers (Diawara

1992; Diawara 2010). This has resulted in a large pool of art films. Although filmmakers like Ola Balogun and Hurbet Ogunde from Nigeria started making reel films in the 1960s, this could not be sustained because of the high cost of production. The current booming video film industry falls in the category of popular film tradition, which does not fall within the theoretical framework of this book.

The films foregrounded in my discussion are: Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, *Guelwaar* and *Moolaadé* (Senegal 1974, 1992 and 2004); Jean-Pierre Dikongué-Pipa's *Muna Moto* (Cameroon 1976); Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3 000 Years* (Ethiopia 1976); Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso 1982); Souleymane Cissé's *Finyé* and *Yeelen* (Mali 1982 and 1987); Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Finzan* (Mali 1987); Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and *Tilai* (Burkina Faso 1986 and 1990); Mohamed Abid Modoun Hondo (Med Hondo)'s *Sarraounia* (Mauritania 1987); Moussa Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (Senegal/Canada 2002); and Dani Kouyaté's *Sia le Rêve du Python* (Burkina Faso 2001). In some instances more than one film was chosen from a filmmaker to show progression and/or continuity on gender issues in African cinema.

There are five substantive chapters in this book. Chapter 1 offers a theoretical introduction that underscores various voices and approaches in African filmmaking. I point out the divisions between art and popular films, and ideological and commercial films. These tendencies are not mutually exclusive, but are often subsumed into one another. This chapter also underlines the main concerns of African cinema, paying attention to the 'women question'. Chapter 2 analyses the representation of the girl child. Binarism in gender roles is consistently challenged by filmmakers. The crossing of gender boundaries and mutability in gender roles are examined. The girl child is often advantaged and given greater agency in the films analysed. Chapter 3 focuses on young women. In films set in rural communities, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, women still struggle to break loose from the hold of oppressive traditions. They are often joined by young men in this struggle, and they courageously pay the price for their disobedience to traditional values. In films set in the late 1990s and in the 2000s, the 'liberated' young woman living in the city faces new economic challenges. She struggles to maintain her dignity as she carves an economic space for herself in a male-dominated world. Chapter 4 presents discourses on older women and grandmothers as alternative centres of power. The discussion here pulls in both directions: they both embrace and resist change. The films analysed here are mostly of the mythic tradition, set in



precolonial Africa, and calling for ‘return to source’ – to learn ancient wisdom in order to construct a viable future. The ‘Motherhood’ principle, the face of the feminine agency, is seen as the needed balance to male governance. Far from being a mere custodian of tradition, grandmother figures are portrayed as dynamic in the films discussed in this chapter. Chapter 5, the conclusion, outlines the trends in the representation of gender relations in African cinema, as envisioned by the selected filmmakers. I also point out the direction for further research in African cinema studies.

## Endnotes

1. The experience of filmmaking in other parts of Africa, like Egypt, started much earlier. Egypt drew the attention of the world as a film producer between the 1920s and the 1930s. Its attainment of independence from the British in 1922 and its strong economic position could explain this. Most countries in Africa became politically independent in the 1960s, but remained economically dependent on the West. Paulin Vierya, a Senegalese filmmaker who made *Afrique sur Seine* in 1955 is considered the first African filmmaker in the sense of being the first black African to do so. Ousmane Sembène, however, is fondly regarded as the ‘father of African cinema’ because of the characteristic aesthetics and content of his films.
2. The central argument in Mulvey’s seminal essay on feminist psycho-criticism, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ is that the woman in Western film is a passive object, acted upon by the male who is the active subject that drives the narrative. The woman constitutes what she calls a scopophilic presence for male erotic pleasure, both on screen and in the auditorium. The traditional role of woman in this cinema is to be an object of exhibition and spectacle. The presence of the pretty woman is ‘an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation’.



## 2

# Imaging the girl child

### Introduction

African filmmakers have frequently used children as protagonists in their films to articulate their often social-realist concerns with a kind of empathy that emanates from children's innocence and sincerity. Examples of such films include Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Nyamaton: ou la Leçon des Ordures* (Mali 1986), which portrays the challenges of economic survival in postcolonial Africa from the point of view of a young boy who is forced to drop out of school and work as city garbage collector; Dani Kouyaté's *Keïta! l'Héritage du Griot* (Burkina Faso 1995) focuses on the encounter between a teenage school boy and a griot who awakens in the boy the desire to understand his past and origin as he lives his 'modern' identity, learning in the process that the past, present and the future flow into each other; Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Everyone's Child* (Zimbabwe 1995) focuses on a young girl's challenges when she is catapulted into adult responsibility as breadwinner after her parents' deaths from AIDS; Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi* (South Africa 2006) that tells the dramatic story of the humanisation of an amoral teenager in the searing crime-ridden city of Johannesburg, who is in the end redeemed by the innocence of a child; and Stefanie Sycholt's *Themba: A Boy Called Hope* (South Africa 2010), a teenage boy's story of hope and his unquenchable desire to become a football star despite the painful loss of his mother to AIDS. These are examples of films where filmmakers use child characters as lead actors, often to question society's values and to present their visions of hope for a better future. Children are often projected as bearers of hope for the future, either by their births or through what they say and do in the films.

In this chapter I analyse the role children play, both as major and minor characters, in advancing the gender-conscious arguments of the filmmakers. The period of adolescence or childhood is a significant phase for gender formation. In the traditional African context children are specifically educated through apprenticeship for the roles they will fulfil as adults. Boys and girls are

separated and gender differentiation is seen in the emphasis placed on certain aspects of their development. Girls stay closer to their mothers, aunts or sisters in order to learn the art of womanhood that includes the centrality of motherhood and the management of the home. Boys, on the other hand, join male circles and learn the skills of conquest, defence and hunting, which take them outside the domestic sphere (Adler 1993; Mansaray 2008). These traditional gender roles tend to exist in binary relationships and one is expected not to cross the borders between them. In the view of Mabenga (2000:99), who writes from the perspective of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is a sign of bad upbringing to have boys who like to be in the kitchen or to have girls who like to be with boys or who join in their games. At this stage, young boys and girls begin to distinguish themselves by carrying out responsibilities under the guidance of adults. On closer examination the emphasised binaries in gender formations are arbitrary. Spaces beyond the domestic sphere are indeed accessible to the African woman who, though in the company of fellow females, traverses outer spaces as she goes to collect firewood in the bushes or to fetch water from the river and later as an adult she engages in business and trade that often takes her away from home. In the context of the continent's cultural diversity the gender images, while corresponding to some general parameters, are varied. For instance, in one community it may be 'normal' for a female to take animals to pasture, while in another this is exclusively a male role. Therefore, these roles are social constructions that do not have inherent attachment to gender. The children I consider in this chapter include young adults between 15 and 19 years of age.

I focus on Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3 000 Years* (Ethiopia 1976), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso 1982), Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba and Tilai* (Burkina Faso, 1989; 1990), Med Hondo's *Sarraounia* (Mauritania 1986), Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Finzan* (Mali 1987), Souleymane Cissé's *Finyé* (Mali, 1982), Moussa Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (Senegal 2002) and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* and *Moolaadé* (Senegal 1974; 2004). The selected films include the socio-realist, the mythic, the ethnographic and the penchant of popular genres in order to get a sense of the gender terrains across these genres. Although the filmmakers reflect the social contexts of the films, they also use their creative licence to portray their visions for the communities. The need for change is often articulated through audacious child characters who challenge the status quo in rigid and unproductive gender relations. That the male director tends to 'hide' in the voices of daring child characters to challenge oppressive patriarchy points to how arduous the struggle for gender parity still is for the woman.



## Children in African precolonial and traditional settings

In films set in precolonial Africa like *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, *Wend Kuuni*, *Yaaba* and *Tilai*, the directors consistently use child characters, both female and male, to underscore that gender differentiations of roles are arbitrary social constructs. The children in these setups often cross established gender borders where they feel restricted and uncomfortable. They challenge adults who try to regulate and control their socialisation processes. The idea of binary gender roles and mutual exclusion are variously questioned or at least put forward for discussion. Child characters often inhabit the border zone of possibilities that suggest new paradigms in gender relationships.

Another set of films set in precolonial Africa give child characters 'adult' voices and responsibilities. They make insightful comments and pose intelligent questions to adults whenever they are baffled by the gendered relations that often under privilege the woman. Filmmakers often use child characters to articulate their criticism against oppressive patriarchy. The films I discuss in this category are: Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and *Tilai*, Sissoko's *Finzan* and Sembène's *Moolaadé*. On the whole, these children are in search of a more humane and inclusive community in terms of gender roles.

### Pushing gender borderlines

In *Harvest: 3 000 Years* gender is a significant theme as in Gerima's other films such as *Bush Mama* (USA/Ethiopia 1979), *Ashes and Embers* (USA/Ethiopia 1983) and *Sankofa* (USA/Ghana/Ethiopia 1993) where women feature prominently. His films are characterised by an aggressive and restless energy that asserts the need for change and the search for freedom. As an advocate of Third Cinema, Gerima believes filmmakers need to adopt a 'combative' stance in order to engage their audiences to challenge oppression. He argues that 'the politics of African cinema basically choicelessly leaves African filmmakers to go towards a combative posture.... African filmmakers cannot just be passive' (Gerima lecture 1995).<sup>1</sup> *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, his first feature film, tells the story of an Ethiopian peasant family who gradually grows to resist the class and landlord systems. Two child characters, a boy and a girl, play significant roles in advancing the narrative. This film, in the neo-realist style, is shot in black and white, using the Amharic language and folkloric storytelling techniques. In an epic style, Gerima represents the struggle of the peasants against their

landlords as a long and demanding one, though ultimate triumph is guaranteed (Gariazzo 1998:87). The peasant family, who becomes symbolic of the entire peasant class, is made up of three generations: a grandparent, parents and children. In contrast to this, in the family of the landlord, Gerima, only makes reference to the landlord's wife and children who are not seen in the film. It is the master – the landlord – who is the centre of his family and speaks for them. This centralised authority of the landlord does not only crush the peasant family, but also annihilates the identity and existence of his own wife who is not given agency in the film. The shared experiences of colonisation for the African man and woman are differentiated through gender. At one level, there is the oppression of the peasant family within the feudal landlord system, at another the voiceless female within the privileged social class is seen in the marginal presence of the landlord's wife. Indeed, if the peasant man is 'colonised' in this context, the voicelessness of the female subjectivity is even more pronounced (Ashcroft et al 1995; Spivak 1999).

The main protagonist in *Harvest: 3 000 Years* is Kabebe, a 'mad' army veteran whose articulation of the truth disturbs the establishment. Kabebe is warmly remembered by his peers as a courageous patriot who fought gallantly to free his country from foreign domination, although he and his colleagues are now among the poorest of peasants. His madness is a result of disillusionment: the heroic sacrifices he and his peers made have not paid off for the majority of the people. The theme of post-independence disenchantment that Kabebe's character represents is prevalent in African literature and film as seen in the works of artists like Sembène, Ngūgī wa Thiong'o and Zézé Gamboa.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly through Kabebe's words and actions that the various themes in the film are explored. He is both a symbol of 'political wisdom' and of the people's 'yearning for justice' (Ukadike 1994:190). The plot in the film follows the gradual and systematic education of peasants. Young Berihun becomes Kabebe's ardent follower and takes over the leadership when, in the final confrontation with the master, Kabebe not only kills the landlord, but also, in disappointment, commits suicide when his colleagues do not support him in his action. When he finds out that he will inevitably be arrested, rather than endure the humiliation of being captured, he commits suicide as a form of revolt. As Sandra Meneses (2009:3) argues in her analysis of the concept of female suicide in works of art:

Revolutionary Suicide is fueled by hope, when refusing to take part in any game of slave and master in society; instead of the normative view that suicide may be fueled by powerlessness and despair, as in the case of Reactionary Suicide.



Kabebe's suicide is clearly motivated by revolutionary sentiments. Gerima portrays the gradual awakening of the peasants in this non-linear narrative style that aims, above all, to expose the oppression of peasants under the feudal landlord system. Just as the peasants' awareness gradually increases in the film, the provocative cinematic style that employs songs, repetition and extreme close-ups of peasants' faces, especially towards the end, makes audiences clamour for change. Ukadike (1994:191) describes the film as subversive both in style and content:

[It is a] film that dramatises the process of societal transformation, it illustrates its inevitability with a revolutionary cinematic technique in which elaborate compositions create hypnotic images rendered through good camera work, strong editing strategy, as well as an innovative use of music and silence.... Gerima's strategy is to invoke sympathy for the peasants as well as to justify the need for violence as the only avenue left for the repossession of one's dignity.

In *Harvest: 3 000 Years* Beletech, the seven-year-old girl child from a peasant family, is a key player in the evolution of the story. The film begins with the representation of the daily routine of a peasant family who wake up at dawn to begin work and return home from their master's fields at dusk. In the opening sequence, Beletech helps her mother milk the master's cow before they leave for the fields. She is charged with the responsibility of delivering *all* the milk, daily, to the master's house and later joins other peasant children in tending the cows in the fields. Meanwhile, her parents are tied to the plough in the master's field from dawn to dusk. Beletech only appears in few sequences of the film, yet the role she plays and her utterances are important statements on gender issues within a hierarchical social structure. In the class context of this film, gender is conflated and made almost invisible, except for the snippets that come through Beletech. It is more the position of the peasants as workers that is the issue. This validates Petty's (1996) observation that the male filmmaker often tends to subsume gender concerns into class. Gerima does excellently in exposing the master's exploitation of peasants regardless of gender and age and in provoking the desire to resist such treatment in the audience. Although Gerima does not give Beletech much screen time, he 'atones' for this by the intensity of agency he allots to her. When Beletech wants to join her peers (boys) in their play, they exclude and discriminate against her because of her gender. She cannot understand their reasoning because they are all equal when tending the master's cows. The fact that she is female does not stand in the way of her performance of duty. In the case of her exploited labour, her gender is conflated with her class

as a worker, but it is used to exclude her when it comes to sharing privileges and rights.

Beletech consistently resists her gender-based exclusion and tries to prove to the boys that she is not different from them when it comes to demonstrating courage and a sense of duty. She is granted an occasion to prove this when she courageously tries to save a cow from drowning in a flood. The master had earlier warned that should any of his cows be lost, the peasants would pay with their lives. The master's threat together with the desire to prove that, as a girl, she is not afraid spurs Beletech to action. As she bravely runs to save the cow, she cries out: 'Even if I am a woman, I won't submit. I am not afraid'. She drowns with the cow. Her male counterparts watch the tragedy unfold from a safe distance. In this incident, Gerima dramatises how desperate Beletech is to prove herself. The tragedy of this promising young woman validates how women in certain contexts may be driven to undertake unreasonable and difficult tasks to prove that they are not inferior – often not a wise thing to do. In the film, the boys were able to see that it was not safe to follow the cow into the swirling flood and so they watched the drama of the young girl unfold from a safe distance. In a society without gender discrimination it becomes unnecessary to prove oneself to be acknowledged. Through this incident, Gerima subtly introduces the woman's story in *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, his first feature film, just as Sembène does in *Borom Sarret*. Beletech's story in this feudal traditional society remains a mostly untold story which is suffocated and drowned in the whirlpool of class conflict.

Gaston Kaboré's reflection of the relationship between young adolescence in *Wend Kuuni* expands the discourse on traditional gender socialisation where the exclusive spaces are assigned to females and males. Kaboré uses history as the perspective from which to reflect the collective memory of his community through film. From the platform of the present, he reflects the past in order to project the future. As a filmmaker he is concerned with the kind of energies the present can draw from the past in order to redirect steps in the direction of the future (Eke et al. 2000:33–34). All his films, beginning with the first feature film, *Wend Kuuni*, deal with the precolonial past. In a conversation with Jean-Pierre Garcia (2007), Kaboré explains how he views his 'political' role as an African:

When I make my films, I try to find what will reflect my present approach as a filmmaker, my involvement in contemporary life. Those moments that we seized, that will take on the value of eternity tomorrow provided we



preserve our films, stay eternal. This fear of losing ourselves is perhaps what gives us this touch of genius that makes us want to create each day.

*Wend Kuuni* is a seemingly simple story set in precolonial Africa in the Mossi Empire of Burkina Faso. This is an apparently stable, peaceful and idyllic traditional African society. The film, in a way, is an account of gender relations in a precolonial African society. The director represents the network of social relationships as they are lived in the everyday interactions between husband and wife, and females and males, and gives the impression of the unmediated reality of the past. These social relationships are, on the whole, represented as normal, historical and deceptively harmonious. However, Kaboré's comments about the setting alerts audiences that gender relations in precolonial Africa were far from ideal. The Africa in the past he has chosen to represent is one that is autonomous, but 'with its own oppressive forces and inner contradictions, a community which I do not regard as an ideal African society' (Pfaff 1996:228).

*Wend Kuuni* begins with a close-up of the inner room of a hut and reveals a woman crying. She is seated beside her son, Wend Kuuni, who is ill and sleeping on a mat. The woman's hunter husband has been away for 13 months and there seems no hope of his return. A man opens her door and suggests, in a reasonable manner, that the woman marries another man. This suggestion appears well-meaning in patriarchal logic where it is unimaginable for a woman to raise a child alone in the event of the death of a child's father. It is inconceivable for the woman to be a single parent especially if she is raising a son (Oyewumi 1997; Tsanga 2011). This decision has nothing to do with a woman's feelings; it is all about the pragmatics of raising the son to be a man. The focus is on the son and not her individuality as a human being.

The woman refuses this proposal and thereby risks being ostracised by the community that considers her deviant for doing so. The community's distaste of her choice is seen when they set her house on fire and send her fleeing from the village to take refuge in the bushes. This sequence serves as a preface to the gender conflicts in the film. The film's opening credits are superimposed over a traveller riding a donkey who finds a young boy lying unconscious by the roadside. Efforts to ask the boy about his origin and name are useless as he is mute. The traveller mounts the boy on his donkey and takes him to the nearest village where Tinga and his wife Lale live. This sequence resonates with the biblical tale of the 'Good Samaritan' and introduces the parabolic aspect of this film. The traveller, who has no fixed place, asks Tinga to keep the boy while he attempts to trace his parentage. When all efforts fail, the boy, through the

intervention of the village chief, is formally adopted into Tinga's family as a brother to Pongnere, the girl in the family. Tinga names the boy 'Wend Kuuni' meaning the 'Gift of God'. Wend Kuuni is received as a gift into this family that lacks a boy child.

The position of women within the institution of marriage in patriarchal African society and the friendship between Wend Kuuni and Pongnere in a gendered social context emerge as prominent themes in this film. Kaboré uses parallel editing to portray the separate gender socialisations of boys and girls. Wend Kuuni is trained by Tinga to take on the male gender role, while Pongnere is with her mother who apprentices her to take on a female role. The relationship between these children is lyrically portrayed as Pongnere, in particular, challenges the established gender restrictions within the community. Pongnere is drawn to Wend Kuuni as the long-awaited brother who joins the family. She follows him to the pastures against the community's expectations of her role as girl child. She becomes a source of disquiet for her mother as she often crosses the boundaries into the male-child space she enjoys being in. Pongnere's love for Wend Kuuni, expressed in her dream, is strong enough to make him regain his speech. This prophetic dream she has about Wend Kuuni who is dumb throughout the film is realised in the last sequence.

Both Beletech and Pongnere are young girls associated with vivid dreams about liberation. In *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, Beletech is the only character who dreams about change. Even if the circumstances in which they live cannot afford them time to narrate their dreams at night, she insists on sharing her graphic dream with her family. In this community the conventional time for listening to each other's dreams is in the morning when one wakes up. In this case, the peasants do not have the luxury of time in the morning as their labour for the master begins immediately on rising. The unstoppable series of dreams Beletech has in the film compels her to break conventions and make both her mother and grandmother listen to her hope-inspiring dream as they prepare the evening meal. In this dream, which is central to the film's message, Beletech envisages the possibility of change in her community. In her dream the master is dressed in white and Beletech's parents are tied to a yoke, pulling it and staggering under its weight. Kentu (the master's servant) stands submissively by the master who is seated in the centre with a whip in hand, ready to strike. When her parents become too tired to continue, the master's son, also dressed in white, comes to get Beletech and Berihun (her brother) and ties them to the yoke, but the two young people break loose. This dream is almost seamless



with the reality of the peasants in the film. For years, the status quo has gone unchallenged and is reinforced from generation to generation.

The dramatic end of Beletech's dream corresponds with the film's end that ruptures the continuity of the oppressive feudal landlord system. The young people break loose from the yoke and become bearers of hope for change. Beletech's ten-year-old brother, Berihun, lives to realise Beletech's dream. Fascinated by Kabebe's revolutionary teaching, he becomes his first disciple. He learns from Kabebe that the best way to break the chains of oppression is through education. The interactions between the two progressively lead to Berihun's expressing the desire to go to school because he is no longer satisfied with the dominant social structure. His self-awareness increases when Beletech dies. For the first time he breaks his silence and criticises the landlord system. When the master orders his family to skin a dead cow and send the skin over to him, at a time they are still saddened by Beletech's death, he realises how the life of a peasant means nothing to the master. He becomes a rebel and leaves home to follow Kabebe. The supposed role of education and of the African educated elite in leading the new nation was a major concern in African literature of the 1960s and 1970s, corresponding with the euphoria of the political independence in the 1960s. This is evident in the works of Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah.<sup>3</sup> Berihun's growing consciousness in the film is a direct result of his education by Kabebe.

Through Kabebe's ideological influence, Berihun comes to realise that the grain they have harvested for the master for years, without demanding a share in it, belongs as much to them as it does to the master. After the death of his teacher Kabebe, he comes to realise that it is his responsibility to plant the seeds of change. He is ready to stand alone since the peasants, who have become accustomed to handing over the entire harvest to the landlord, are too scared to even think they have a right to the harvest although they have cultivated the lands all their lives. In the final sequence, when a truck transporting the contested harvest passes the peasants, the camera singles out Berihun who briskly walks forward to catch up with it. He is contrasted with the rest of the peasants who remain helplessly seated, watching the truck carry the harvest away. Berihun runs after the truck and hangs onto it as it speeds off. After the murder of the master by Kabebe, the harvest moves from the feudal landlord to the contemporary, political institution. Berihun holds onto the truck as a challenge. He sees the connection between the oppressive landlord system and the postcolonial administration. He is the hope that Beletech dreamed about and

will break the yoke of the master which has for 3 000 years bound their parents and grandparents.

The pace and rhythm of the film is predominantly slow, but dramatically becomes fast in the final sequence. This corresponds with the gradual process of the peasants' increasing awareness as they move from passivity to activism. The film ends prophetically by representing the youth (Berihun) as a symbol of hope for a future where the harvest will be plentiful for peasants. Gerima places the most evocative and energetic series of close-up shots at the end of the film as a series of fantasy projections. There are close-up freeze frames of several faces. Berihun's face, accompanied by the dead Kabebe's voice-over teaching about the class struggle in different parts of Ethiopia, dominates the sequence. Different faces and voices of workers of all categories in different parts of the world that are united by the common experience of exploitation join in and break their long silence. Their voices rise in crescendo as they all begin to talk after years of silence. As if in response to this tumultuous noise from the peasants, a second series of close-up shots repeatedly show abundant harvests of all kinds of grains raining down and hands caressing rich harvests of beans and grains from the fertile earth as joyful ululations rise above the din. Finally, the sound of work implements breaks the silence as the end credits roll. The great hope that the peasants will reap and enjoy the fruits of their labour is concretely projected as realisable in the future. The children are portrayed as the bearers of this hope and portray the triangular relation between the past, present and future that Gabriel (1989:53–64) writes about in his Third Cinema aesthetics. The film's end strongly foregrounds pan-African and class concerns. Although it is the girl child who dreams of the wonderful future projected at the end of the film, she is not physically part of its realisation. Gabriel's reference to the woman as the custodian of the story who is not part of the narrative (as mentioned in Chapter 1) seems to apply here. The woman's story, tucked away in a film that is concerned with issues of class is still waiting to be fully told. The concerns of gender analysts like Petty (1996) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1984) that gender is often sacrificed and relegated to the margins in the works of male artists where class and race issues are involved, seems to apply here.

In *Wend Kuuni* the understanding between Pongnere and Wend Kuuni is deep despite the latter's inability to speak for the greater part of the film. The film mostly employs long-shots with a few judiciously used close-up shots; this is often in sequences where the two children are together. One of these occurs at the end of the film, when the children engage in dialogue for the first time.



The poetic shots here emphasise the beauty and innocence of their relationship. Diawara (1989:204) comments on the sequence:

The frequency of long-shots diminishes to give way to subjective shots inscribed with love. It seems like [a] lovers' rendezvous every time Pongnere joins Wend Kuuni in the fields. The shot/reverse shots of Pongnere smiling with Wend Kuuni and the bigger than life high-angle shots of the boy isolate the youth from the day-to-day purposeful activities of rural life.

In his analysis of this film, Diawara sees three embedded myths. The first narrative is the search for the missing father, the second is the desire for a son that becomes Wend Kuuni and the third myth is the story of the emancipation of the daughter. Of the three myths, it is the third one which is a new and original insertion into the narrative that follows the oral traditional search motif. The only biological child in Tinga's family is a girl, Pongnere. In this patriarchal society she symbolises a lack (Diawara 1989:202–203). Pongnere's enthusiastic welcome of Wend Kuuni as a brother and 'Gift of God' underlines the relief his presence brings to the family. Kaboré uses a close-up of Pongnere giving a limpid smile to welcome Wend Kuuni into the family when they first meet. The friendship that ensues between them poses a challenge for Lale as her daughter is now more inclined to keep company with Wend Kuuni than with her female peers as patriarchal socialisation demands. Pongnere is often isolated from her female peers and finds herself restless in confined, gendered spaces. She loves to be in the open pastures in the company of Wend Kuuni. This is rendered through the dialogue she has with him in the pastures. Wend Kuuni cautioned her against following him to the pastures and worrying her mother.

- Wend Kuuni: What Have You Come Here To Do?
- Pongnere: I Have Come To See You.
- Wend Kuuni: You Know Your Mother Doesn't Like That.
- Pongnere: She Doesn't Know At All. If I Were A Boy, I Would Have Loved To Herd The Goats With You.
- Wend Kuuni: [Looks At Her With Affection] Hm...
- Pongnere: Do You Also Wish You Were A Girl?
- Wend Kuuni: Yes.
- Pongnere: [Close-up of her smiling at him] You have said 'yes', Wend Kuuni, only to please me.

This dialogue reveals Pongnere's conceptualisation of herself as a female. She sees her socialisation as an obstruction to doing what she really wants. She often evades her mother's surveillance and manoeuvres her way into doing what she enjoys. The close-ups and motif soundtrack that accompany the dialogue between Pongnere and Wend Kuuni enhance the beauty of their spontaneous friendship, constrained by society's imposed gender boundaries. The filmmaker unobtrusively underlines gender as a construction when he portrays Pongnere's desire for the open spaces of the pastures as overriding whatever constrains her. Her desire to be a boy is associated with the freedom of the pastures that represents the immensity of unlimited options. However, her doubting the truth of Wend Kuuni's desire to be a girl shows her awareness of society's value system that privileges boys. No boy would wish to be a girl as this gender is associated with both a lack and limitation of options. This limitation of gender space and role for the girl child in precolonial Africa corresponds with Padmore Agbemabiese's (nd) research on the continued marginalisation of the African girl child in Ghana.<sup>4</sup>

In a way, Wend Kuuni's introduction into Pongnere's family leads to her emancipation and self-realisation. His male presence provides her with the opportunity to define and understand herself. Her tendency to break through gender borders and her continual escape from her mother's control expresses the desire of the girl child for more space for self-expression. Petty's (1996:191) comment that in making Pongnere desire to be a boy, the filmmaker is proposing 'masculinity as a self-sufficient position with access to agency and femininity as



“the non-subjectum” carries partial truth. To argue that the filmmaker equates agency with masculinity and the lack of it with femininity would be inconsistent with the general tone of this film which subverts and challenges the status quo, especially with regard to the position of women. Pongnere’s desire to be a boy rather shows her awareness of the limitations society imposes on her gender, which she would like to overcome as seen in the film. Kaboré is quite unlike Sissoko in handling the theme of women’s position. He takes a more subtle than activist stand in inserting female characters as harbingers of change in society. It is evident in the film that Pongnere does not reject her gender role as a girl. She performs what her mother asks her to do as a girl. However, when this is done she becomes restless because she still has energy and creativity to do more – to go out to herd the goats with Wend Kuuni. Her wish to be a boy is related to gaining a position from which to access and explore more possibilities. She realises she can be in both spaces. Her sensitive portrayal is the director’s way of showing what is wrong with the community’s tendency to define rigid gender spaces. By placing Pongnere on the unstable margins of gender, Kaboré shows that even in precolonial Africa that often gives a false impression of stability and equilibrium, such restlessness within gender confines existed. Stuart Hall’s view of any form of cultural identity as unstable and always shifting, helps to explain the border position Pongnere occupies in constructing her identity in the society. According to Hall (1990:225), any form of identity is a ‘becoming’, a ‘being’ that is fluid:

It belongs to the future as much as to the past... It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, culture and power. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Pongnere is positioned on the margin of her gender to challenge the apparently ‘eternal’ gender identity into which she is being socialised. Through her the filmmaker shows gender identities as ongoing constructions.

The story of Wend Kuuni is presented as a distinct story within the film. When he loses his ability to speak due to the traumatic experience of waking up to find his mother dead beside him, he remains dumb up to the last sequence of the film. When he begins to speak, his personal narrative opens a new story that begs for further information. By giving Wend Kuuni the opportunity to tell his story, the director gives space for children to express themselves (Chirol 1999:115–126). The concept of friendship between young boys and girls as portrayed in this film is rare in the traditional African context that socialises

the genders in separate spaces; female-male friendships tend to have existed in relationships that may lead to marriage. In the relationship between Wend Kuuni and Pongnere, however, Kaboré portrays the value of friendship for its own sake – friendship that is not impeded by gender boundaries. The story of the female is usually not the focus of oral narrative, as expressed by Gabriel in ‘Intolerable Gift’ (Chapter 1). In the context of this film, Pongnere is represented as continuing the struggle started by Wend Kuuni’s mother who refused to yield to society’s pressure to take another husband because she still held onto the hope of her missing husband coming back home.

Beletech and Berihun in *Harvest: 3 000 Years* and Pongnere and Wend Kuuni in *Wend Kuuni* are child characters who express the desire for change in precolonial African settings. The filmmakers use the children to both expose and challenge traditional mores that need revision or to change altogether. The girl child in both films is given greater agency in expressing gender concerns and both dream about liberation. Beletech dreams of the liberation of the peasants from the oppressive feudal system. This would be a class struggle in which both genders would be involved without discrimination. Pongnere dreams about Wend Kuuni regaining his speech. It is very important that he regains his speech to tell his story – about his mother, the reason for her flight from the community and her subsequent death in the bush. Therefore Wend Kuuni’s regaining his speech is closely linked to his mother’s (the woman’s) story, which forms the missing link to Wend Kuuni’s identity. Wend Kuuni, the new generation of man, has his story and identity linked to that of his mother more than to his absent father. I find it interesting that the dreams of these young females are linked to the welfare of the whole community. These *feminine* dreams desire the wholeness of the community, where both genders contribute to its happiness. The end of both films is open, showing the continued search for wholeness. Wend Kuuni is out in the vast pastures and sees a cursory glimpse of a hunter. Could that be his lost father? The young boy is out in the fields and Pongnere desires to be with him as the search for wholeness continues. In *Harvest: 3 000 Years* both Beletech and ‘mad’ Kabebe are endowed with the same level of consciousness: she focuses on gender and he on class. Their deaths show that gender and class are significant fronts of struggle in an African setting. Beletech’s brother Berihun, who also becomes the only ardent follower of Kabebe, integrates the visions of both. The film ends with him holding onto the speeding truck, full of grain, in quest of the dream of liberation.



## Mature actions and adult voices in children

Ouédraogo's *Yaaba*, which means 'granny', is a story about tolerance and friendship. As is common in most of Ouédraogo's films, *Yaaba* presents the relationship between an individual and the community. Sana (Yaaba) is an old woman who becomes the victim of a community's prejudice and is isolated simply because she does not fall within expected social parameters for a woman of her age. Like Wend Kuuni's mother, who refuses to remarry after the disappearance of her husband, she is ostracised by the community as a 'witch'. The community is intolerant of her 'difference' in this case. The film tells the story of how Sana is befriended by a young boy, Bila, who gives himself to her to be appropriated as her 'grandson'. Bila does this out of sympathy for her and against the hostility of the community towards her for being old, unmarried and childless. Under 'normal' circumstances she would have been a grandmother. The narrative follows the everyday rhythm of life in a precolonial African setting.

The emotional power of the film, according to Ukadike (1994a: 279), lies in the choice of Sana as the village scapegoat. It is uncommon in Africa to find an old woman who is given the kind of treatment to which this granny, a source of wisdom in the traditional African context, is subjected to in this film. In reaction to a sequence where Naoga, another marginalised member of the community and Bila bury Yaaba who is found dead in her hut, the filmmaker Bekolo comments: 'Where in Africa would you have that [only two people burying an old woman]? Even though set in Africa, that particular scene raises the question of whether the film was made by an African' (Bekolo in Eke et al 2000:27). My view is that although this sequence may not correspond to everyday realities, it reflects the reality of the loneliness of an old, unmarried and childless woman in Africa. Edith Okiria's (2011) research on the situation of women of this social category in Uganda authenticates the utter isolation of old and childless women who society disrespects and sees as a curse and who are often discovered dead, after they have died all alone. Just like Yaaba, despite their desire to be loved and to enjoy social relationships, there is often prejudice against such women and they are falsely victimised. Similarly, Petty's (1996:191) view of Yaaba as more of a symbol than a reflection of a living individual makes sense since her symbolic representation is built on the lived experiences of such old women. In this sense *Yaaba* is a symbol of all forms of discrimination based on difference. The film yields richer meaning when Sana is seen as a metaphor with which to critique forms of prejudice in any society.



Two children, Bila (male) and Nopoko (female), feature prominently in the film. The film opens with an establishing shot that reveals the children running in the expanse of a semi-arid landscape. The third character, Sana, is soon introduced in this space. The children avoid her because they are afraid of her. All three are headed to the community cemetery to pay their respects to their loved ones. In spite of her ‘difference’ death is an experience that seems to unite them: they are all going to pay their respects to their dead loved ones. With minimal dialogue the sequence effectively communicates the relationship between the trio. The two children play hide and seek as they return home. The viewer notices Sana’s desire for communication when she helps Nopoko find Bila’s hiding place. This alerts the viewer to become interested in the humanity of Sana. Later when the village boys throw stones at Sana and shout insults at her, the viewer identifies with Bila who takes Sana’s part. Bila gets into a fight in defence of Sana and overcomes one of the boys, who then harbours a grudge and looks for an opportunity for revenge. This incident draws Bila irrevocably towards Sana. When the villagers falsely blame Sana for setting their granaries on fire, on the very day when she was out in the cemetery with the children, Bila rebels against his father in support of Sana. From then on, he habitually steals food from the community to feed Sana, whom he fondly calls Yaaba.

Between the two children, it is Bila who plays the more active role in relation to Sana. One day as they return from the well, Bila and Nopoko meet the boys he had fought with, who now want revenge on Bila. In the process of their fresh fight, Nopoko is wounded by a rusty knife. She becomes gravely ill and Sana, who diagnoses tetanus, offers to help. However, the community that has long labelled her a witch cannot accept any help from her. The search for a cure for Nopoko leads the community to a charlatan witch-doctor who tells them what they want to hear: Sana, the witch, has captured the soul of Nopoko and the only way for the girl to recover is to ostracise the old woman from the community. Bila warns Sana of the community’s verdict. When the men come to perform the ritual banishment, they do not find her in her house. The only satisfaction they have is to raze her house to the ground so she will have no shelter in the village. Despite this, Nopoko does not recover. Moved by her commitment and friendship to Bila, Sana goes out of her way to look for a respectable medicine man, Taryam, to treat Nopoko. The men (village elders) reject this healer who comes as a friend; they continue the search for a healer. Among the adults it is only Bila’s mother who converts to believing in Sana’s goodness and the efficaciousness of Taryam’s treatment. She secretly sends Bila to request Sana’s recommended healer to treat Nopoko despite the community’s hostility. Nopoko



is healed. In appreciation of Sana's role in the recovery of Nopoko, Bila's mother prepares a meal and sends the children to take it to Yaaba. However, they find the old woman dead and all alone. Ouédraogo reinforces the tragedy of the community's intolerance by making it impossible for the adult community to reach out to Sana when they begin to realise her goodness. By the time an adult begins appreciating Yaaba, it is too late to make peace, making her death remain a weight on the community's conscience. It is only Naoga – a drunk who is equally marginalised – who assists Bila to bury Sana. It is only at the time of Sana's burial that the viewer is informed of the reasons for Sana's isolation and ill treatment. Naoga explains to the children that Sana lost both parents in childhood and from then she was considered an evil child by the community. Consequently she neither married nor had children.

This film makes a moral statement against prejudice. In line with Ouédraogo's other films, it challenges society's attitude of judging people by appearances and mistreating them because they are not like the majority in the community. Through the more open and trusting attitude of the children, Ouédraogo challenges society to question every prejudicial attitude. He shows that the way to remove bigotry and attendant stereotypes is by entering into relationships with people; this often leads to understanding.

As everywhere, there are laws and customs that govern the life of people. Sometimes they are unjust, but one can do no more than denounce them. Thus, I do not propose to destroy them – that would be presumptuous on my part – but only to pay attention to those who have been marginalised. These are numerous and very often the motives for which they have been distanced from society turn out to be futile, false, the fruit of prejudice than of proven facts (Ouédraogo in Gariazzo 1998:29) [my translation from Italian subtitle].

Bila and Nopoko challenge the community's attitude and make an opening for them to experience Sana's goodness. As the children gradually grow to appreciate Sana's goodness, they progressively expose the community's intolerance by the stance they take. What is in Bila's ability to do is to give himself to Yaaba as a grandchild, to satisfy her psychological and maternal needs. This is Ouédraogo's token of compassion for a grandmotherly woman whose life has not been fulfilled because she lacks what brings her honour in the African context – motherhood. Sana's lack is a tragedy because it has made her 'nothing'. She has become a burden to be rid of and the community is blind to her value as a human being. The director's poignant representation of her experience shows how implicitly oppressive this 'honourable' title of womanhood – motherhood – can be. Although African feminists acknowledge

motherhood as a pillar of African womanhood, their enunciations condemn the discrimination and marginalisation of women who, for various reasons, do not have the experience of physical motherhood (Acholonu 1995). The two children, especially Bila, are compassionate members of the community who gladly accommodate Sana's otherness and soon learn how similar she is to them. The children's understanding nature is extended to other peripheral members of the community like Naoga, who the community treats with disdain because of his drinking and failed relationship with his wife. The children befriend him and try to understand why he has taken to the excessive drinking that has led to frequent quarrels with his wife. They advise him to drink less. The reasonableness of the children's behaviour stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the adult world.

The moral of the film, not to pre-judge, but to understand the reasons behind people's actions, is communicated through the children. Sana speaks from experience and once warned Bila not to judge Koudi, Naoga's wife, for 'apparently' cheating on her husband. Bila passes this message onto Nopoko when she tries to criticise Koudi's behaviour. The maxim 'not to judge' passes from Sana to the younger generation who has grown to enjoy her friendship (Pfaff 1996a:230). The humanisation of Sana and the attempt to integrate her into the community comes through Bila whose actions expose the community's prejudices against her (Diawara 1992:162). The film ends on a note of 'new understanding' about relating to people we consider different from 'us'. This sense is conveyed in the final long-shot that reveals the two children in the vast landscape, running away from the camera view. This closing shot is similar to the opening sequence that framed Yaaba with the two children. This end shows how gradually change takes place in this deceptively static community. Everything appears the same, except that Yaaba is not in this frame. The hope for change hinges on the two children whose accommodating attitude has already, quietly, started the process of change.

However, the marginal role the director gives the girl child in this film is ubiquitous and demands comment. The friendship is basically between Bila and Sana. Nopoko appropriates this friendship through Bila, but she never makes contact with Sana directly. Sana, too, refers to her as Bila's cousin. It is curious how Ouédraogo makes it impossible for the 'grandchild' and 'grandmother' to meet. To the end, the communication between the two is mediated by Bila, the 'adopted grandson'. This includes the occasion when Sana gives the gift of a bracelet for Nopoko through Bila. One would expect such a personal, symbolic and feminine object to be directly passed from 'grandmother' to 'granddaughter'. Such a relationship could have developed between these two



females when Nopoko is ill. For most of the film, she remains a passive presence on whose behalf Bila and Sana act. The only time Nopoko goes with Bila to meet Sana is when they find her dead in the house. In this sense, the director does not quite clearly challenge the patriarchal ethics of this community. It is still the boy child to whom he gives agency and he frustrates the would-be contact between Sana and Nopoko in the same way he does that between Sana and the adult community. This lack of direct contact between Nopoko and Sana is a conspicuous omission that reveals the director's apolitical gender perspective. Both Western feminists like Claire Johnston (in Thornham 1999); Sharon Smith (in Thornham 1999) and African feminists like El Saadawi (2007) contest the often minimal roles allotted female actors in relation to those of males who are often drivers of the story. In this and Kaboré's *Buud Yam* (Burkina Faso 1997), it is the girl child who is ill and remains bedridden through most of the narrative as the boy child goes out on a search for medicine to cure her. This narrative trend tends to leave the traditional gender roles unchallenged. For instance in *Yaaba* Bila's mother gives him a pot and sends him to fetch water. Initially, it appears as if the director wants to challenge the gender status quo. However Nopoko quickly takes the pot from Bila who is sulking because his mother, by handing him a water pot, is treating him as a female. Culturally it is females who carry pots, not males. Bila's mother watches the children from a distance and gives an approving smile when Nopoko takes the pot from her son, which restores the status quo. Ouédraogo suggests, by this reference, that traditional gender roles are not easy to change, although they are arbitrary. In the context of this patriarchal community with its dominant masculine values, the boy child, who by virtue of his gender is an 'insider', is a more probable character to gradually challenge the community's negative attitude towards differences than the girl child who is on the periphery. Giving agency to Bila over Nopoko makes sense in this context.

In *Tilai* Ouédraogo presents a drama centred on the subjects of love, honour and friendship in the context of hegemonic patriarchy in precolonial Africa. The main conflict in the film is between father and son over the use of authority. Kuilga is an adolescent girl who makes critical comments about what is puzzling and unfair in the behaviour of the adults in the film. Nogma, her older sister, is betrothed to Saga, the eldest son of the patriarch, Namenabe, before Saga leaves the community in search of something. He returns after nearly two years and finds a significant change has occurred. His father has just married Nogma, his betrothed, because he thought his son would not come back. Tension builds between father and son, and the community as the young man is not prepared

to accept Nogma as his stepmother. He cannot live with his father in the same compound and cannot accept this patriarchal ethos. He settles to live on the edge of the village. The patriarch self-righteously blames Saga for what has happened and expects him to apologise for his rebellious attitude.

The tension between father and son builds when Nogma discovers Saga's residence and an illicit relationship is easily struck up. The secret affair between the two is soon discovered and the penalty for the incestuous relationship is death for Saga. Saga's younger brother, Kougri, is destined to carry out this ritual of death, but he spares his brother and allows him to flee and live in exile with a directive never to come back to the community that now considers him dead. Saga takes refuge in the village of his maternal aunt and Nogma later joins him. However, the relative peace and security exile offers is soon ruptured when the news of Saga's mother's mortal illness reaches him. He has no choice but to come back to his natal community so that he can see his mother before she dies. He arrives at the edge of the village just as the funeral procession heads to the cemetery. When he blows his horn as at the beginning of the film, everyone, except Kougri, takes him for a ghost. The reality of his existence becomes intolerable to his father who now blames Kougri, his second son, for having betrayed the community by letting Saga escape. Before leaving for exile, Kougri in nervous desperation picks up Saga's gun and shoots him in the back as he pays his last respects to their mother. The film ends with the old patriarch blankly staring in the direction of Kougri, whose turn it is to now leave the oppressive community.

The role of the adolescent girl in this film is to encourage Nogma, her indecisive sister, to rekindle the relationship with Saga. The trio is united in evading patriarchal surveillance. Kuilga poses important questions to her reluctant mother about love and marriage because she does not want to end up unhappy like Nogma, who was forced by patriarchal logic to marry Saga's father. Kuilga's mother does not want to discuss love with her inquisitive daughter; in fact she finds her questions bothersome because she had never asked such questions in her childhood. Love and sexuality are two deeply taboo subjects in the traditional African family setting. When girls are prepared for marriage, emphasis is placed on specific areas to sustain marriage and the conjugal relationship (Tamale 2011). The kinds of questions Kuilga asks seek for deeper communication with her would-be spouse. Her mother, on the other hand, expects her daughter to grow into accepting existing gender rules and a woman's place within their society just as she had done. The following dialogue between the two is significant:



- Kuilga: Confronts her mother, who is busy doing her domestic chores]. Mother, i want to talk to you.
- Mother: [Not looking at her, going on with her washing] what about?
- Kuilga: [Following her] mother.
- Mother: [Looking at her impatiently] what do you want?
- Kuilga: Tell me about life, about Nogma.
- Mother: Stop bothering me.
- Kuilga: [Going away from her mother].
- Mother: [reflects] Kuilga [she turns and looks at her], Nogma will come to love her husband just as I came to love your father. [Kuilga walks away as she looks defiantly at her mother and father][my translation from Italian subtitle].

Kuilga is often framed beside her mother to heighten the often oppositional relationship between them. At the beginning of the film, when Saga's horn ruptures the peace of the village, Kuilga is framed side by side with her mother in a medium-shot as they blame each other. Kuilga blames her parents for being too quick in giving Nogma in marriage to Saga's father; her mother blames her for being insolent. When Nogma escapes from the village to follow Saga into exile and a group of young men are sent in pursuit of her, Kuilga and her mother are again on opposing sides. Kuilga prays that the young men do not succeed in finding Nogma, while her mother hopes the search succeeds and Nogma is punished accordingly. In the same way, when Nogma's incestuous relationship with Saga drives her father to commit suicide to save his family's honour, the girls' mother banishes Nogma for making her a widow. Kuilga responds to her mother's unsympathetic attitude towards Nogma with insolence when she refers to her own father as 'your husband'. Such a response to a mother is peculiarly disrespectful and difficult to accommodate. It is used by the filmmaker to emphasise the questioning and challenging attitude of young people towards their parents.

The director also uses Kuilga to challenge the indecisiveness of Kougri in taking a definite stance in the conflict between his father and Saga. Through

the young girl's impulsive comments, Kougri not only spares Saga's life, but also helps Nogma escape to join him in exile. Kuilga is as decisive as Saga in challenging patriarchy. She is a catalyst that motivates other characters to move in the direction of change. Although Kuilga is not one of the major characters, Ouédraogo uses her as a mouthpiece to challenge the rigidities in patriarchy and to call for a culture of greater freedom and compassion over the law. Unlike in *Yaaba*, the director here uses a female child to make critical comments on 'forced' marriage under patriarchal authority – an issue that directly affects the female. Kuilga shows no remorse when her father commits suicide in the name of defending the family honour; all her sympathies lie with Saga and Nogma who are out of step with the community's values. Is the director hiding behind a female child's voice because she is peripheral in relation to patriarchy, to say what he would have found it difficult to articulate through a male child who is seen as more of an 'insider' within the hegemonic status quo? In this position of a 'child outsider' would Kuilga's critical and playful comments be received as non-threatening and perhaps appealing to audiences or would it be brushed away as childish? Whatever the case may be, her 'innocent' comments on a well-established traditional institution that feminists acknowledge as one of the pillars oppressive to the African woman (Aidoo 1988), capture the viewer's attention. The filmmaker's more direct statement on gender is suggested towards the end of the film when both Saga and Nogma are happy for the baby they are expecting – whether it is female or male is not important. This attitude contrasts with that of Nogma's parents who have two grown daughters, but are still plagued by a sense of 'lack'. They still look forward to getting a boy. The subtle gender comments Ouédraogo makes through these characters show he belongs to the non-militant tradition of filmmaking.

### **The politics of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)**

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has increasingly become a contentious subject in communities where it is practiced. This practice is reported to exist in all parts of the world, with prevalence in 28 countries in Africa and the Middle East (UNICEF 2005, 2008; WHO 2008). In a 2005 UNICEF report, there are six African countries where 80% to 99% of women between the age of 15 and 49 undergo the practice. Presently the top ten African countries in the range of 77% to 99% prevalence are Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, North Sudan, Sierra Leone and Somalia. Although there are indicators that awareness about risks of the practice is growing in these communities, the practice is still rampant. FGM/C is jointly recognised



by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as one of the violent practices against women. To emphasise this point, in the 1980s, the United Nations adopted the name, FGM/C instead of the benign 'female circumcision' to distinguish it from male circumcision since the cultural motives for the procedures are clearly different between genders. While scientific research proves that male circumcision has health benefits and it is hailed as instrumental in reducing the risks of sexually transmitted diseases (Auvert et al 2005), this is not at all the case for women. On the contrary, research and experience show that it is detrimental to women's health. Apart from the pain and trauma, the often unsterile conditions under which the procedure is performed puts the female's life directly in danger and, later in life, increases the rate of neonatal deaths, stillbirth, abortion and infections in both the child and the mother. Today, the practice has also come under attack from a human rights perspective and has brought activists, artists, health organisations and NGOs to voice their concerns about it. This tradition does not only emphasise gender inequalities, but also buttresses the discriminations against women. Furthermore, FGM/C is often performed on young females below the age of consent, thereby abusing their right to freely choose to participate in such a painful process. Individual country reports (US Department of State 2001) show that the ages at which a female may be subjected to this range from one week with the upper limit open to accommodate those who are forcefully cut for trying to evade FGM/C. The instruments used range from fingernails to knives, razors, scissors and other sharp instruments.

Communities that practice FGM/C proffer different reasons for doing so. These reasons often become incorporated into their cultural and religious creeds, making it obligatory for all women who are part of these. Foundational myths have often been used to solidify the exercise that has also become a central feature of female identity in these communities. The practice often crosses social, economic and religious divides. Those living in cities and villages, Muslims, Christians and Animists are all united to ensure the continuity in practicing communities. Religion and tradition are often invoked to prevent potential rebels who may fear to trample on what the community holds sacred. Among the reasons for this is that these societies fear women's sexuality, perceived as 'naturally' uncontrollable, and therefore believe it needs to be harnessed. Especially in Islamic countries like Somalia and Egypt where the practice is pervasive, the claim of religious chastity for women is interpreted as one of the key reasons for the practice. A woman who seeks to avoid FGM/C is seen as having loose morals. In Egypt for instance, both Islam and Christianity



are invoked to reinforce the patriarchal communities' drive although neither the Qur'an nor the Bible says anything about female 'circumcision', while both scriptures are explicit about the need for male circumcision. This is a clear misuse of religion in defence of patriarchy. Both Sembène and Sissoko are unambiguous in challenging society and exposing such lies.

Because of this desire to control the female's sexuality, FGM/C has acquired a ritual form in many of the practicing communities and has become a sacrosanct rite of passage, linked to culture, religion and surrounded by myths. This makes it difficult for any woman to think and live outside it, for her honour and that of her family reside in the practice. In most of these communities, the talk about the female sexual organ as dirty, unpleasant, opposing the male organ and dangerous for the health of the child she is expected to bear, all culminate in the need to cut the woman's organ out for the benefit of patriarchal society. Another reason is the belief that the female cut enhances the man's sexual pleasure (even if the woman does not share in this pleasure). This is particularly true of type three FGM that involves the removal of part or all the external female genitalia: clitoris, labia minora and labia majora. According to the WHO Report (2008), this is the most dangerous kind of FGM/C for women's health. This practice takes the woman's rights away and ideologically explains her objectification as a process that makes her more valuable in the eyes of society. This ideological explanation, which has run in the communities for ages, has turned women themselves into architects of these practices. Cases of women who are 'difficult' are brought to the attention of the patriarchal heads where elderly female initiators face opposition from rebellious younger women, as seen in the films I analyse in this chapter. Such a hierarchy, with respect to FGM/C, shows the great interest of the patriarchs in the ritual as a form of control. The pressure society puts on the female gender is expressed by one family interviewed by UNICEF (2005:11):

[P]arents have a threefold obligation to their daughters: to educate them properly, cut them and find them a husband. This obligation can be understood as a social convention to which parents conform, even if the practice inflicts harm. From this perspective, not conforming would bring greater harm, since it would lead to shame and social exclusion.

Traditions are a result of the deep values of a community and change takes long to happen, especially when it is not in the interest of the hegemony. Where the ritual is sanctified and protected by foundational myths (Bagnol & Mariano 2011; Tsanga 2011), it becomes even more difficult to resist. Female excision is,



for instance, explained by Dogon myth as descended from their supreme god. In this myth, Amma, the supreme god (masculine) who lived in heavens created Earth (feminine) and immediately the two were joined together. However, Earth's clitoris opposed Amma's penis, making their embrace uncomfortable. This offended him, leading to his circumcision of Earth's clitoris, thereby establishing equilibrium between the masculine and feminine forces. The two were then able to have intercourse and beget the first human race (*Encyclopaedia of Religion* 1987). This initial intercourse that could only be achieved after the destruction of the 'male' factor in the female body is the reason for life to exist. The presence of the clitoris in the female body is perceived as the force that inhibits the life force. This Dogon myth sees the control over the woman's body (sexuality) by the man as essential for life to exist. Because a woman's highest traditional vocation is motherhood, resisting such a belief is not just intolerable to patriarchy, but women themselves have come to see evading the ritual as self-annihilation.

Because FGM/C is practiced differently in various communities, UNICEF/UNFPA divided the practice into four broad categories in order to explain it more clearly. In the first place, unlike male circumcision, FGM/C is not motivated by medical reasons. Different communities within a nation may practice all four types of FGM/C, one type or a combination of the four. The extent of the cut often defines the risks to the women's health. Type one involves partial or complete removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce. This is referred to as a clitoridectomy. In type two, part or the entire clitoris is removed together with the labia minora. The labia majora may also be excised. This is commonly referred to as excision. The francophone West African films I analyse in this chapter refer to the practice as 'excision', although this is also the general terminology in French for all forms of FGM/C. Type three involves the narrowing of the vaginal opening and sewing the labia minora and/or the labia majora together as a seal over the vagina, with or without excision of the clitoris. This is referred to as infibulation and it is the version predominantly practiced in Somalia. Type four categorises other harmful techniques of altering the female genitalia for cultural, religious, but non-medical reasons (Committee on Bioethics 1998; US Department of State 2001; UNICEF 2005; 2011; WHO 2008). That the United Nations and non-governmental organisations are the ones principally heading the fight against FGM/C helps to highlight the challenges involved in eradicating this practice. Sissoko's *Finzan* and Sembène's *Moolaadé* are the films I will use to discuss how filmmakers address FGM/C as a problem society needs to tackle.

In *Finzan* (Mali 1987) (translated as ‘protest’), Cheick Oumar Sissoko’s style of addressing gender issues is markedly different from Ouédraogo’s. In an interview with Clement Tapsoba, Sissoko expresses his clearly political posture as a filmmaker when he comments that:

I never choose to make a film about a subject. It is [a] political and social situation that makes me handle a story. Up to the present I have followed this law of the needs of African societies and their emergencies.... It was my political commitment that led me to the cinema. The filmmaker always takes second place behind the politician in the emergencies of a country such as Mali (Tapsoba 1994:9–10).

*Finzan*, then, is a political film. The film is the story of two young women, Nanyuma and Fili, who struggle against the traditional practices of wife-inheritance and female excision respectively. It is acknowledged as one of the films that brings ‘feminist consciousness’ to the fore (Petty 1996:191). Similarly, Ukadike comments on the sincerity and boldness with which Sissoko represents women’s issues and calls it ‘a film that looks at women through an empathetic male’s eyes’ (Ukadike 1994a:271). The central concern of the film is a call for the emancipation of women from oppressive traditions. This commitment is so evident that the same critic continues to say that:

For anybody who has been following feminist writings, it could be easily misconstrued as a film made by a woman or a United Nation’s documentary seeking out Third World ‘barbaric’ cultures for debate (Ukadike 1994a:270).

This comment clearly implies it is not common for men to vehemently represent a women’s cause as Sissoko has done in this film. Ukadike’s reference to Abdou Diouf, the former president of Senegal, shows his reservations about scrapping such a foundational, traditional practice. In defence of this culture, Diouf (in Olayinka 1987:27) argues:

Female mutilation is a subject that is a taboo.... But let us not rush into the error of condemning [genital mutilations] as uncivilised and sanguinary practices. One must beware of describing what is merely an aspect of difference in culture as barbarous. In traditional Africa, sexual mutilations evolved out of a coherent system, with its own values, beliefs, cultural and ritual conduct. They were a necessary ordeal in life because they completed the process incorporating the child in society.

The opinions of filmmakers like Sembène and Sissoko, who represent this topic empathically from the point of view of women, is to emphasise that contemporary culture can evolve out of this practice that has outlived its usefulness. Just as in many parts of Africa communities have evolved and have abandoned practices such as the throwing away of twins and treating some people as outcasts, so can



these practices that endanger the lives of women be stopped. Both Sembène and Sissoko show that the struggle against female excision is still a difficult one.

The main protagonist in *Finzan* is Nanyuma who, at the age of 15, marries a 45-year-old man chosen by her father. Her husband dies, leaving her with two children. According to tradition Nanyuma now belongs to the family of her deceased husband. She cannot be free to remarry a man of her choice as long as her late husband has a brother willing to inherit her. Bala, the youngest brother who is destined to inherit her, is also the village fool. The scene is set for a major conflict when Nanyuma refuses to marry Bala and displays a preference for Bengali, a widowed man she desires. He is the man she wanted to marry before her family forced her into marriage with her late husband. The village chief and the council of elders favour Bala and approve his marriage to Nanyuma. In desperation, Nanyuma leaves her husband's village to return to her father's home. She soon realises that she cannot find succour in her father's home as a married woman. Her father threatens Nanyuma's mother with a decree of dismissal if she accommodates Nanyuma in 'his home'. Nanyuma once more seeks refuge and compassion, this time from her brother-in-law who lives in the city. When she flees to the city, Nanyuma realises that there is no difference between the men in the city and those in the village when it comes to defending a tradition that suits them. She is literally bundled up and returns to the village to live out her fate like every other woman in her community.

While in the city, Nanyuma encounters Fili, the daughter of her brother-in-law, with whom she strikes up an immediate friendship. Fili's father decides to send her back to the village because she is becoming difficult to control in the city where she is exposed to progressive ideas. The two young women join forces in their struggle against patriarchy. In her struggle, Nanyuma wins the sympathy of the young boys in the village who play practical jokes on Bala on the nuptial night.

As for Fili, the village soon comes to realise that she has not yet undergone the rite of excision which every 'decent' woman must undergo. Fili's mother died in the process of giving birth to her and the doctor cautioned Fili about the risks that excision brings later in life, during childbirth. Fili's attempts to explain the dangers of this practice to the villagers go unheeded by her relatives and creates a rift between the women. She becomes a source of ridicule to many in the village. Her relatives and the council of elders cannot endure this disgrace anymore. They order the surgeons to carry out the operation by force. She bleeds to death. With the help of the children, Nanyuma succeeds in evading her marriage to Bala. She chooses to leave a community that cannot accommodate

change. Typical of his style, Sissoko laces this painful story with comic inserts that ridicule patriarchy. In this activist film Sissoko uses children as minor characters who make significant remarks about gender relations and especially the oppression of women. Jigi, Nanyuma's seven-year-old son supports his mother's efforts to evade her forced marriage to Bala. Bala becomes the victim of the children's pranks. They play mischievous tricks on him to scare him into stopping his pursuit of Nanyuma. They hide up a tree and act as the mysterious voice of an oracle 'thundering' a terrible warning to Bala as he passes by the tree. The fearsome voices order him to leave the dangerous woman, Nanyuma, alone if he loves his dear life. Bala who boasted of being courageous enough to kill a snake with 'his' power is now scared by the 'divine' voices from the tree and runs for his life. In yet another of the humorous scenes, Jigi and his friends poison Bala's drink with a laxative so he develops a runny stomach on the night of his supposed wedding to Nanyuma. As they argue about the right dosage of toxin to administer Bala, they use the kind of racial discourse they have heard from their parents – that African men are stronger in constitution than Europeans – and so they decide a bigger quantity of the concoction would be needed to achieve the desired effect on Bala. The groom-to-be ends up spending a sleepless night and gets out of bed extremely weakened the following morning. The energetic Nanyuma, on the other hand, hums a jovial tune as she performs her chores. Sissoko employs the children's jest to ridicule patriarchy's blindness and to expose Bala's idiocy. This village idiot is the man destined by tradition to marry Nanyuma. If the children can see through this 'idiocy', how can patriarchy be so blind?

The children's empathy lies with their mothers. As they prepare the poisonous concoction for Bala, they swear an oath of secrecy to keep the affair among themselves. They decide to swear by their fathers because they 'do not always tell the truth' (from the film). Swearing by someone means putting the life of that person at risk. The children would rather risk the lives of their fathers for they depend on their mothers for everything, they decide. The supremacy of 'mother' stands out in these 'innocent' children's plays. Similarly, Nanyuma's little daughter, who has been a witness to her mother's miserable life, once asks her grandmother what crime Nanyuma has committed that keeps her a fugitive. Through the little girl's comment, the director articulates the effect of domestic violence on children who are often the silent witnesses of what happens in the family. Through these children, Sissoko projects a future that is more sensitive to the position of women within hegemonic patriarchy. At the end of the film, as Nanyuma leaves the community in search of a freer one,



her son Jigi goes with her. Intolerant patriarchy is turning away its younger members and in a way working towards its own demise. It is also intriguing to note that while the young boys support Nanyuma, the young girls hurl insults at Fili for evading excision. They see her as a disgrace to womenfolk. In the context of this community, the time has not yet come, particularly for males, to support women in challenging such an ingrained tradition; it will take time for the young girls to unlearn what has been entrenched in them through hundreds of years of socialisation. It is like taking some steps forward and backward at the same time. Sembène's *Moolaadé*, produced 17 years after *Finzan*, depicts the same subject, that of female excision, with even greater activism that leads to better results. That this subject still remains topical nearly 20 years later shows how difficult it is for the community to leave this deep-rooted tradition.

*Moolaadé* (Senegal 2004) expresses Sembène's consistent concern about the position of African women in society as reflected in several of his earlier films in which women are foregrounded as protagonists. *Black Girl* (Senegal 1966) recounts the story of an African girl working as a domestic servant in a French family; she is forced to commit suicide because she cannot take the mistreatment of her mistress any longer. *Emitaï* (Senegal 1971) and *Ceddo* (Senegal 1976) are set in the traditional past and portray the story of women's valour against colonial and religious oppression. *Xala* (Senegal 1974), which is a satire on the ineptitude of the post-independence elite in Africa, focuses on the family of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, where three female characters are used to highlight and criticise the style of the all-male leadership cadre in Africa that is portrayed as a curse descended upon the continent (Lindfors 2010:131). *Faat Kiné* (Senegal 2001) is the story of a contemporary single mother's successful attempts to overcome negative experiences at the hands of the men she had relationships with. She emerges as an entrepreneur whose success is reinforced by the graduation of her daughter and son from university. This film portrays three generations of women (the grandmother, mother and daughter) standing on each other's shoulders to attain greater success. This is a pointer that contemporary women can transcend the societal challenges of the past and carve out respectable places for themselves in the world of tycoons and attain economic independence. Sembène emerges as a filmmaker for whom gender is a key issue in addressing development questions in Africa. Female boldness and protest against forms of oppression are characteristic of his representations.

In *Moolaadé* he is more radical in addressing the topic of female excision. The narrative revolves around Collé, a strong woman, who having lived through the negative effects of excision has resisted this practice by refusing

that her daughter be cut. Her action bewilders the community, but as long as her resistance is restricted to protecting her own daughter and is known only to her nuclear family and among the *salindana* (female ritual elders), the offence is tolerable. However, when she provides sanctuary for four children who flee the knife, she becomes a menace to the community. The film is the story of her unrelenting fight to protect the girls who seek her patronage and to mobilise the community at large around this cause.

It is taboo for a woman to evade this ritual that prepares her for the high office of motherhood through marriage. No African man, whether traditionalist or Western-educated, would normally entertain the idea of marrying an uncut woman (Africa-Women.org 2009). It takes the utmost courage for any woman to resist such a socially important practice. Without being propagandist, Sembène represents the cruelty of this ritual to children who cannot make independent decisions about the practice, but follow the logic of tradition. The flight of the children is a courageous act that challenges the community to begin to question the practice. Sembène comments that the children's audacity is not just fiction, but part of the reality that happens annually:

Each year we witness this kind of thing, women standing up against it. And children are afraid of blood. That's in all countries of the world. They don't want to get cut or hurt. Each year, there are many little girls who run away from the operation, who sometimes end up in the cities. Some of them also wind up being prostitutes, because they have left their families behind (Pride 2005).

Sembène exposes the shocking predicament of the girls who go through the ritual. Two of them prefer to commit suicide rather than to accept being cut. The atmosphere in the ritual camp is filled with painful moans and complications associated with operations that go wrong. The children's pain is contrasted with the officious callousness of the elders who, on hearing about the suicide of the two girls, ritualistically bury them without much ado. The most painful case is that of little Diattou who is duped by her mother and 'stolen' from Collé's protection. She is forcefully excised by the *salindana* as she struggles against the knife and tragically dies from bleeding. This becomes the turning point and the moment of self-awareness for most of the women who have uncritically supported and practiced this ritual. In the film, culture and human rights are in conflict. Female excision is one of the contestable practices where human rights and culture are in conflict (Bagnol & Mariano 2011; Bennett 2011). The *salindana* protect their trade because it is what gives them social status as deputies of the patriarchs and in material terms it is their livelihood. The



arguments of the adults in defence of this practice present the community as obsessively inhuman and insensitive.

As in *Faat Kiné*, in *Moolaadé* Sembène represents the dynamic relationship among generations of women in protesting excision. Collé becomes involved because the four girls took the initiative to protest the tradition. They seek asylum with Collé because she is a role model in this regard. She encourages them to remain firm in their resolve and allays their fears about false stories circulated to entrench the ‘incontestable’ ritual. It is inspiring news for them that Collé refused that her daughter be cut, and yet the chief’s son in France is her fiancé. They can hope to marry after all. It is also significant that the four girls choose to remain in the community so that the ‘battle’ is fought and won from within, using the available resources. This is an organic way to bring about change. The children actively deconstruct and question the community’s narratives around the ritual and look for allies within the community to support them. Indeed, it is their decision to resist the ritual that tests Collé’s heroism. Giving agency to the children makes the narrative even more persuasive in terms of human rights. The death of the three girls is an imperative statement about their rejection of this culture.

The films discussed that are set in precolonial and traditional Africa allows patriarchy to emerge as an institution whose logic dictates that the female gender be disadvantaged. In all the films discussed in this chapter the female protagonist is used by the filmmakers to challenge hegemonic patriarchy’s marginalisation of her gender. The children are used to challenge the various manifestations of oppressive patriarchy and to call for a more inclusive culture that gives room for the female voice in the traditional context. The next section analyses how filmmakers position children in different social contexts from the ones I have discussed in this section.

## Children in adult worlds

In a number of films, children are catapulted into the world of adults and forced to think and behave like mature people as they fend for themselves in difficult social settings that threaten their innocence as children, as in the case of Sene Absa’s *Madame Brouette* (Senegal 2002). In Med Hondo’s *Sarraounia* (Mauritania 1987), a film that celebrates the contribution of a woman in Africa’s struggle against colonialism, I focus on the brief childhood of this female and her upbringing as a special child. I include Sembène’s *Xala* (Senegal 1974) and Souleymane Cissé’s *Finyé* (Mali 1982) where the oppositional stances



taken by young adults to their fathers' misguided leadership of the community show the filmmakers' views about the role of the younger generation in African leadership. The child characters are portrayed as announcers of hope for a better future.

Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* takes its title from the lead character, Mati, popularly called Madame Brouette as she is identified with the wheelbarrow she pushes around town as a mobile market for household goods. Mati is a beautiful and enterprising woman who desires to settle into married life. Her first marriage ends unhappily leaving her with a little girl, Ndeye, who becomes her companion throughout the film. She falls in love again with Naago, a womanising, corrupt policeman whose only interest in women is predatory. Although she comes to acknowledge his weaknesses, Mati is also determined to tame Naago and to hope for a happy life with him. Naago, however, cannot help his foolishness and irresponsibility, although he loves Mati. On Tajaboon, a carnival day that marks the New Year on the Muslim calendar, when men dress as women and women as men, Madame Brouette is rushed to the hospital to deliver their baby. At this crucial moment when Naago is expected to be by her side, he cannot be persuaded to leave the pub where he is carousing with other drunks. The following morning, however, he staggers into their bedroom and disrespectfully demands to see his son. Mati's patience is exhausted and she ends her nightmarish life with Naago by shooting him dead using his own gun. She then valiantly gives herself up to the police in full acknowledgement of her act.

Although Madame Brouette remains at the centre of the narrative, the director addresses more issues related to gender positioning in the community than just exposing women's deplorable experiences in marriage. When her father makes her marry a man she does not love, Mati's friend, Ndaxte, who is in an unhappy relationship confesses: 'They stole my heart and ruined my life'. Her situation of suffering in the domestic sphere is not different from Mati's. Out of love, Mati stays in a relationship with a man who only wants to have a good time without facing any responsibilities. Little Ndeye experiences her mother's unhappiness and complains to Ndaxte that since her mother has come to know Naago, she has lost her natural smile and looks much older. In the film the director also probes the corruption in the high offices of the police and how this particularly affects poor and single mothers. He delicately balances the bustling life in a shanty town by the sea, where the vulnerable are taken advantage of, with genuine love, friendship and solidarity among some of the characters who survive the 'darkness' of the area.



Two children, Ndeye and Samba, her ‘boyfriend’, feature prominently in the film as witnesses to the painful experiences of women, some of which are a result of their gender position in the community. Ndeye is a witness to her mother’s experiences and she grows up to be as strong-minded as Mati and their expectations about life often correspond. When Naago, the traffic police officer, spots Mati crossing the street with her wheelbarrow and immediately pursues her, both Ndeye and Mati are excited about him as a father surrogate and a future husband respectively. When he takes them to a cheap canteen for a drink and gives Ndeye 100 francs, both consider him a friend. In their need both are vulnerable to his charms. Like every child, Ndeye expects a good life for her mother and herself: to ride in a car rather than move on foot and pull a wheelbarrow, to have more leisure time than always be at work and to eat a variety of foods like the people she watches on television. By giving a list of the little girl’s wants, the director shows how challenging life is for Mati as a single mother as well as the desire of a child for a comfortable home. The desire of both mother and child is for a ‘father’ in their family. This explains their eager, if uncritical, embrace of Naago. Sene Absa’s perspective in this regard corresponds with African feminists’ appreciation of a good marriage as central to family harmony as expressed in Buchi Emecheta’s response in an interview in which she defines her brand of feminism:

I am a feminist with a small ‘f’. I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital ‘F’ woman who says women should live together and all that, I say NO! Personally I’d like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn’t work, for goodness’ sake call it off (in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:7).

This comment is aligned with the filmmaker’s vision of the relation between men and women in marriage, as seen in his portrait of Mati who is in search of a good relationship.

When the relationship between Mati and Naago becomes bad, Ndeye is as much hurt as her mother is. In the sequence in which Mati shoots Naago, Ndeye identifies with her mother so much that for a moment, it is hard to tell if it is Mati or Ndeye who shoots Naago. The ultimate reason for her shooting him was Naago’s inability to protect Ndeye when she was almost molested by the merry-makers on Tajaboon. Because Ndeye is exposed to her mother’s struggle to eke out a living, she is more mature than her age would suggest. On Tajaboon, she goes through a similar ordeal to her mother, who is taken to the clinic to have a baby without the supportive presence of the baby’s father. Ndeye goes to look for Naago at a Tajaboon party to inform him about Mati’s condition, but in

his drunkenness he does not care. In the process Ndeye is almost molested by the hooded men having fun with Naago in the pub, but is saved by little Samba who comes in time to help. In this bawdy atmosphere of adults, replete with corruption, debauchery and irresponsibility, the friendship between Ndeye and Samba blossoms and gives hope for a better future in gender relations. Samba tells Mati that he loves Ndeye and will do everything in his power to protect her. What sounds like children's talk proves true when he breaks the ring of indecent revellers descending on Ndeye and saves her from imminent abuse. Like the little partridge in the story she tells Samba, Ndeye need not fear in her mother's absence when Samba is with her. Sene Absa pays particular attention to the relationship and dialogue between the children as it provides a stark contrast to the chaos and irresponsibility of the adults. In this uncertain atmosphere of drugs, prostitution, violence and corruption where genuine love finds it hard to survive, the pure friendship between the two is a beacon of hope. This mature-sounding sentiment is the opposite of how the self-seeking and adventurous men like Naago and London treat women.

One of the most poetic moments in the film is when Samba asks Ndeye to tell him a story in the midst of the noisy and chaotic atmosphere of Mati's canteen. Ndeye breaks the air with her clear, melodious voice and tells the story of the little partridge whose father is long gone and is now left alone by his mother with instructions not to go out alone. Ndeye's story speaks for the desires and fears of all children in families torn apart by violence. They desire the ideal family where father, mother and child live together. In the story, the mother who is also leaving instructs the little one 'not to go out alone'. The absence of parents is a debilitating experience for the child who is thrown off balance. However, the narrative presents the courage of the little partridge that must, of necessity, go out and fend for itself. The partridge's strength lies in its consciousness of the lurking dangers, those who want to prey on it and of the community's support and warning to 'watch out, the caiman sleeps with one eye open'. The griots who sing the chorus of this song-story represent the adult community that wishes children well in their struggles. Although Ndeye personalises this story and tells to Samba, it is easy to read Madame Brouette and Ndeye's story in it. In effect, both children are the courageous little partridges who must fend for themselves in a difficult environment. In the closing 'rituals' Madam Brouette performs before she goes to jail, she hands little Ndeye to little Samba to take care of and gives her new-born baby to her friend, Ndaxte to nurse. The freeing of the caged partridge in her courtyard, with the words: 'I am like the partridge. I need my freedom' is evidently symbolic. Paradoxically, Sene Absa makes Mati enter the



police car not as a captive or a culprit, but as a free woman. The viewer admires rather than pities her.

Ndeye and Samba are situated in a harsh social setting that has made them mature faster than other children of their age in protected homes. They have been let down by adults who have not been the needed role models for them, yet they resolve to live responsible lives in the future. In accompanying her mother through her sad life's journey, Ndeye learns the pitfalls of life ahead of time so that she does not fall into the same trap. The refrain of the song in the story about the little partridge is dominated by the caution to be alert, for danger lurks. As children, their awareness of the dangerous environment in which they live gives the viewer the hope that they will gingerly find their way out of danger. Their relationship represents purity and sanity in a corrupt and irresponsible environment. Ndeye is given voice and agency as the narrator of the tale of the little partridge, which is also her story.

I find it particularly interesting that the child Mati bears is a baby boy – he represents a future generation of young men who, like Samba, will hopefully be more sensitive to and protective of the female gender. This hope comes out in the duet-lullaby sung by Mati and Ndaxte (mothers) who communicate their best selves to the baby as they celebrate his life. Their wish that this baby has a better life than their own is their gift to him:



Mati: Will he [the baby] look like his father? Show respect for your fellow men to earn God's mercy. Take care of your wife and children, as if they were prayers.

Ndaxte: Get in the habit of praying, my son. Praying is the soul of salvation. Then you will attain wisdom. You will know that happiness is fleeting.

Mati: Then your life will be as valuable as gold, worth more than bronze.

Ndaxte: Life is but a search for happiness. But happiness and suffering are brother and sister, just as joy and sadness are rivals.

Mati & Ndaxte: Then I will be proud of you, proud to say my son is a doctor or a captain. That he faces life's great challenges, that he will make me a grandmother and will become a grandfather, so he can tell our grandchildren the incredible story of Madame Brouette... the incredible story of Madame Brouette ...the incredible story of Madame Brouette.

[Mati kisses the little hand of her baby and smiles upon him].

Here is an intense moment between mother and son, infused with love and hope. The beauty of the mother's procreative attribute to bring forth and nurture life is emphasised in this lyrical sequence. She is the quintessence of sacrificial love that hopes for the 'birth' of a generation of 'other'-centred men. The African feminist idea of 'motherism' (Acholonlu 1995) and 'Stiwanism' (Ogundipe-Leslie1994:1), that distinguishes itself from Western feminism as respectful of women's role as mothers and focusses on the kind of social transformation where both men and women are involved, is reflected in the attitude of Madame Brouette and Ndaxte as they infuse new life into this new-born male child. In the words of Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:1),

this brand of feminism is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest.



The birth of this baby and the women's attitude reflects the desire for unity between men and women that both the filmmaker and African feminists call for. In this particular sequence, the filmmaker implicitly compares what Vaughan refers to as the gratuitousness of the mother as a sacrificial gift to her child, compared to the calculative male principle that Naago represents in this film. What Vaughan says of motherhood as a core feminine principle explains the relationship between Mati and the baby in this film. The mother is above all characterised by giving and her entire life becomes a gift:

Gift giving involves giving directly to satisfy needs, it is other oriented, paying attention to the other and creating or procuring goods which satisfy the other's specific needs. Gift giving transfers value from the giver to the receiver by implication, indeed if the receiver were not important to the giver; she would probably not be satisfying the need. Gift giving creates the bonds of community – in fact the word 'muni' in Latin meant 'gifts' and is the root word of both 'community' and 'communication'. By nurturing the bodies and minds of the people in their care women actually create the community whose members would not exist in exactly that way without that sustenance (Vaughan 2002).

Therefore, in this sequence these two women are 'planting the seed' of the future generation of men by the values they transmit to the baby.

The gender arguments that Sene Absa articulates through the representation of the child characters, Ndeye and Samba, come through their associations with their parents. Little Ndeye's gender aligns her, already, to go through an experience similar to her mother's in future if nothing happens to avert the situation. She shares her mother's happiness and unhappiness as she accompanies her throughout the film. The dangers and risks both daughter and mother face on Tajaboon are specific to their gender as women and links them. Her resolve to protect her daughter from such gender-specific problems leads Mati to shoot Naago. It is not only Mati who is prepared to fight for the security of her daughter from sexual harassment; the children themselves, Ndeye and Samba, are endowed with incredible determination to protect themselves, but especially the girl child from abuse in the absence of her mother. Consistent with the film's advocacy for stable marriage life and family, the filmmaker portrays little Samba as a model for the new generation of men who should embrace their traditional responsibility of protecting and defending the family and especially women and children. Samba swears to live up to this responsibility and, indeed, Mati symbolically leaves Ndeye in his care. Samba's role then is to remind the adult men of this primal family responsibility they have abandoned. The new hope that the child characters herald and stand for is to reawaken traditional gender values and responsibilities and apply them in a changing social context. On the

whole, the portrayal of resourceful and independent-minded female characters, while emphasising traditional family values, also point to new directions as the narrative resolution of *Madame Brouette* indicates. Even as men are challenged to take up their responsibility in the family, this cannot be done on the basis of the old paradigm where he is seen as the centre of absolute authority. The complementary relationship and friendship between Ndeye and Samba reflect the projected harmonious family relationship to be constructed on gender equity and without the usual preferential hierarchical order between the genders. Indeed, in the portrayal of female characters like Mati and Ndaxte, Sene Absa deconstructs the myth of men as breadwinners and women as consumers. The man, in the contemporary economic structure, needs to accept that he is not always able to fulfil his traditional role as breadwinner. He must accept a woman as a partner in this, because she actually is already a breadwinner as is evident in the roles played by Mati and Ndaxte in the film. It is explicit in the film that Biraan, Ndaxte's husband, batters her because of his frustration from his sense of failure as he is unable to satisfy the traditional expectation of him as a man. His failure to accept his limitations leads to his erratic beating of his wife, and Ndaxte leaving him altogether. As Bertrand Tietcheu (2006:123) puts it:

The economic crisis in Africa today challenges this notion, for we have men losing their jobs and subsequently they cannot afford this responsibility anymore. They are not really what the myth tells us. It is a delusion and we have to adjust our minds.

Mati, on her part, does not threaten her male partner about the fact that she is a breadwinner; instead her relationship is assuaging, to emphasise the point that it is alright for the man to accept the woman as a partner without the fear of losing power. In my view, the implied point of this film is that women and men need each other in their efforts to construct a peaceful community. Indeed, speaking on behalf of Women for Women International, Patricia Morris (2007:38) correctly explains that:

The role of men in the promotion of women's rights and active citizenry has been a central part of our deliberations. While it may be possible to enhance women's opportunities for economic, social and political participation without engaging men, we have come to understand that it is unlikely that gender equality – the ultimate goal of women's empowerment – can be achieved without partnership between women and men.

In the context of this film, the child characters project the hope for a gender relationship of parity and partnership in constructing family relationships where the worth of each gender is recognised and appreciated.



In Med Hondo's *Sarraounia*, the special child is the queen herself. This film recounts the story of the successful struggle of an African queen, Sarraounia of the Aznas, to defend the independence and autonomy of her people from imperialism. This film falls in the category of Sembène's *Ceddo* in celebrating the heroism of historical, precolonial African princesses and queens. Like Sembène, Hondo selects story events that are not often included in official history books, but are part of the popular, collective memory of communities. The plot of the film follows two related storylines: Sarraounia's cultural background, upbringing, her administration and response to the challenges of French imperialism; and the French imperial desire for conquest, characterised by wanton destruction and the subjection of all for the glory of France. It is the interaction between these two stories that drive the plot. In the film a significant reference is made to Sarraounia's childhood and upbringing, showing her as a special child with a predestined future.

The film opens with Sarraounia as a child as she plays with her peers. She is distinguished from the ordinary children by the white bands she wears around her arm and ankles to denote her royal status. The viewer learns that her mother died while giving birth to her. Dawa, her foster father, decides to bring her up and educate her himself. The film suggests that for Sarraounia to be well brought-up for her future leadership role, she needs to be cut off from the influences of women and whatever 'feminine' education they may give. She is literally pulled away from feminine influence when Dawa orders the two elderly women who are dressing her in a wrapper as all girls of her age wear to stop the procedure. He dismisses the women from the room, removes the wrapper from Sarraounia and begins to instruct her on what she must expect in life. The dismissal of the women from Sarraounia's socialisation marks the young girl as different and portrays society's attitude towards femininity. Dawa's instructions are meant to undo what the women's formation of Sarraounia has achieved in attuning her to traditional gender identity. He wants to make Sarraounia his creation in order to make her fit for her exceptional role as a warrior queen. An ordinary girl of her age would begin to cover the upper part of her body, but Dawa instructs her:

Don't confine your breasts. Let your body breathe. Wind, rain and sun ripen and forge the body to make it firm yet flexible like tamarind wood. Never forget, Sarraounia: you were fed on mare's milk, not woman's milk. You have not been raised by women. Never let childish, sensual pleasure distract you. When the time comes, man will obey you, not command you. He will give you brief pleasure, but he won't be an arrogant lord.

The director inserts gender arguments into the narrative when Dawa initiates the princess into the exclusively male art of weaponry, medicines, poisons, control of sexuality and the practice of the occult. He shows her medicines that stop menstruation and conception. The implication is that for her to succeed as a political leader, Sarraounia cannot be a 'normal' woman. She must negate her femininity to enter the exclusive political public sphere that is perceived as male. Although this film is conceived as a celebration of a woman's contribution in African colonial history, Hondo cannot accommodate her as a 'genuine' woman in charge of public affairs. The destruction of her femininity in order to enter the 'male-stream' is a sad affair, although the queen emerges as a formidable warrior and politician with a pan-African view. The director fails to hide his sexist attitude when he makes the queen successful only by sacrificing her womanhood. The total exclusion of women not only from the queen's socialisation, but also later from significant positions in her royal court, accentuates this director's blind spot on matters of gender and women, in a film that supposedly pays homage to strong women.

The destruction of her sexuality notwithstanding, Sarraounia's administration delicately balances the feminine and masculine factors. The director uses her, above all, to advance his pan-African rather than gender agenda, to reiterate Petty's (1996) and Leslie-Ogundipe's (1984) argument that male African filmmakers often prime national and pan-African concerns above gender. Sarraounia has become famous, not by the children she has left behind, but by her courageous leadership against imperialism. Her sacrifice of motherhood is cued by the director to be read as 'honourable'. This makes Sarraounia's position as a model for African women in public and political affairs an ambiguous one. A woman's role in effectively embracing both public and domestic responsibilities remains a thorny issue in many African societies. Rather than solving a problem, *Sarraounia* poses a question in the gender debate in the African context where women still agitate for more space in the public sphere. Nonetheless, what the filmmaker has done is an outstanding inversion of women's traditional honour, where marriage, procreation and the continuity of one's progeny are honoured values (Bahemuka 1992:120).

In Sembène's *Xala*, the viewer is presented with a biting satire on post-independent African leadership. One of the businessmen, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, represents the ethical bankruptcy of this class of leaders. El Hadji represents the elite that have taken over from their former colonial masters. This group verbally professes the principles of African socialism to win the applause of the naive crowds when it suits them. In reality, they are a bunch of self-



serving individuals (Ashbury, Helsby & O'Brien 1998:83). Typically, to boost his ego as a very important person, El Hadji takes a young virgin, Ngone, as his third wife to crown his recently attained status. As a man in his 60s, he asserts his virility by organising an expensive wedding to mark this occasion. He uses tradition and religion to back his desire for a third wife, though this is variously resisted by members of his family. However, his excitement comes tumbling down on the nuptial night when El Hadji is struck by *xala* (male impotence curse) that makes him instantly impotent. Every attempt to restore his manhood and to consummate his marriage is frustrated and his efforts to find the cause of the curse are focused in the wrong direction. Because of the premium African culture places on male virility, this metaphor of impotence is the ultimate form of deflating male ego and respect (Odinga 2011).

El Hadji's impotence is a metaphor for the socio-economic powerlessness of the African elite as a group (Ghali 1987:51) as a result of their selfishness and skewed policies. His problems accumulate with the number of wives he takes. The expensive wedding, that is not consummated after all, the increased financial demands from Oumi, his jealous second wife, and the amount of money spent on the diagnosis and treatment for his *xala* from different *marabouts* (holy, Moslem religious leaders in West Africa) soon drive El Hadji into an irredeemable bankruptcy. His self-serving colleagues who are even more corrupt are 'scandalised' and expel him from the board as they see him as a disgrace. His crime is his carelessness in allowing the public to see his corruption. El Hadji loses everything; his properties are mortgaged and his second and third wives leave him. The first wife, who he had nearly abandoned in the good days is the only one left to see him through the bad days. This is also the time the poor he had treated as 'human rubbish' claim responsibility for his *xala*. The condition they give for him to get his manhood back is to submit to letting them spit on him as a disgrace as seen in the final freeze frame the audience takes away with them.

The children represented in this film are young adults, Rama and her brother. Rama, the daughter of El Hadji and a university student, is represented as more reasonable in the choices she makes than her father. She openly stands up to him and opposes his third marriage to a girl young enough to be his daughter. This marriage has not only made her father lose moral authority, but has also plunged the family into unhappiness. While her mother, schooled in the traditional values of acknowledging the supremacy of a husband in all things, cannot express her feelings, Rama fearlessly expresses her opinion and speaks to her father on behalf of her mother. Sembène uses Rama, symbol of the future generation of

the African elite, to critique the folly of the extravagance of El Hadji's class of leaders. In contrast to her father who insists on speaking in French, Rama speaks in Wolof and refuses to drink the Évian water that El Hadji offers her as his favourite drink, but which he also uses for washing and cooling the engine of his Mercedes Benz. In her style of dressing and demeanour Rama combines the best in the traditional and modern cultures. Her revolutionary and pan-African outlook is seen in the posters of African textiles, revolutionary leaders like Amílcar Cabral and a map of unpartitioned Africa that line the walls of her room.

At the end of the film, among all the characters, it is Rama who appreciates the rationale for the beggars' invasion of her father's house. When the policeman wants to evict them for trespassing on private property, she tells him that the beggars are her father's guests. In this sequence, the possibility of collaboration between the beggars and the younger generation of educated Africans in fighting corruption is implied. Sembène represents Rama as a balanced hybrid of traditional and modern values compared to her mother. She is proud of her African identity and she crafts the modern onto it. Her portrayal is a critique of El Hadji's wholesale acceptance of anything that comes from the West.

Although he supports his sister's oppositional stance towards their father's third marriage, Rama's younger brother remains a silent presence in the film. He is not even given a name. He silently lifts his sister up after her crashing fall as a result of El Hadji's slap when she expresses an opinion opposed to his third marriage. The hard, aggressive stare he gives his father affirms the solidarity between him and Rama. The camera frame emphasises the conflict between father and children in this sequence. However, the irony in the frame is that El Hadji is oblivious of the hostility of his silent son who is equally opposed to polygamy. His slap neither subdues nor changes Rama's views on polygamy. The resort to violence shows that the 'dominant' male is no longer in control of the situation.

The conflict between dictatorial fathers and their children is even more dramatic in Cissé's *Finyé* (Wind). Both Cissé and Sembène are looking for models of leadership to bequeath the younger generation in the post-colonial era. The traditional authoritarian rule of the father is resisted. The youth want to understand why something should or should not be done. Just as Rama balances the African with the Western, Cissé underlines the need for synthesis between the tradition and modernity in an attempt to find an appropriate leadership model (Diawara 1992:50). The film is considered by film critics as the first



African film to closely examine the issue of power under a military regime in contemporary Africa (Diawara 1992:195; Martin 1995:165).

The plot revolves around a love story between the adolescents Batrou and Ba, whose budding relationship is trapped and suffocated, on one hand by the military dictatorship of Sangaré, Batrou's father; and on the other, by the traditional authority of old Kansayé, Ba's grandfather. The young lovers move between these two authorities who are antithetical to each other. Batrou and Ba are part of the student body that represent the generation of future leaders whose values are different from their fathers' and who challenge both the current military leadership and traditional authority, both of which are autocratic to varying degrees. The relationship between Sangaré, the current governor and the students is particularly antagonistic. The students want a change in governance while Sangaré is out to brutally silence anyone who raises a voice in opposition to the military order of the day. Ba is among the student leaders arrested and put away in a maximum security prison.

Within the plot of political dictatorship is embedded the subplot of Sangaré's dictatorship in the domestic sphere as father and husband. Even here his authority does not go unchallenged. It is Batrou and his third wife, Agna, young enough to be his daughter, who cannot remain subservient to his oppression. *Finyé* is Cissé's call for a change in governance. The symbolic presence of the wind in the opening sequence of the film represents, as in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', a force both of destruction and creation. It stands for the wind of change – the need to create a new system of leadership, based on the foundation of positive traditional values and propelled by the energy of the youth. Throughout the film the wind, associated with the youth, is evoked to underline the inevitability of change as a natural process.

The film begins with students preparing to take a qualifying national examination. Among the students, the camera focuses on Ba who is desperate to pass the exams. He is retaking the examination he had 'failed' the previous year. Other students like Sali, who have parents in influential government positions, are guaranteed to pass even before sitting the examinations. The school system which Cissé portrays is a microcosm of the fascist, military government of the day. It is corrupt and persecutes those students who challenge it. Exam results show that hardworking and confident students who are opposed to Sangaré's administration all fail. This situation sparks a demonstration to denounce both the school administration and the military regime. The military regime descends with all its force to crush the rebellion. The 'culprits' end up in the hands of

Sangaré who makes them feel the weight of his authority. By threatening them with hard labour and death, he manipulates most of the students to give up their resistance. Among those who refuse to give up are Ba and Batrou. Sangaré has a particular grudge against Ba because the latter is the grandson of Kansayé, a renowned traditional chief and son of a murdered political opposition leader. The governor, also, does not want his daughter's relationship with Ba to continue.

Batrou, on the other hand, is determined to continue the relationship with Ba, in defiance of her father's orders. Her love for Ba changes Kansayé's initially aggressive attitude towards her as the daughter of Sangaré. Gradually, Kansayé begins to see the difference between Batrou and her father and to realise that the youth, regardless of their social class, are focused on opposing autocratic rule. The distinct social class difference between Batrou and Ba does not come between them. Boughedir (1992:86) correctly notes that what binds the youth is neither class nor gender. It is their age that marks them. For instance, at the beginning of the film, Batrou with her cropped hair is distinguished from her peers more by her modern style than by gender. The camera does not linger to reveal any particularly feminine or masculine characteristics of the youths as the emphasis is more on their age bracket than their youth. The director, however, tends to distinguish between genders when he attributes greater agency to the female than to the male. This is seen during the protest where the vigilance and activism of female characters seem to be given greater attention than those of males. They also appear to be more vocal and disciplined in the protest. The close-ups of the faces of the students reveal as many females as males in the group. Among those chased by the soldiers, it is only Batrou who manages to dodge the military up to the end. The soldier who persists in pursuing her is thrashed by the women from whom she seeks asylum. Later, she gives herself up voluntarily to secure the release of the women who are held hostage for beating the soldier.

In the sequence in which Batrou takes a bath with Ba, she is not bashful before Ba as one would expect. Cissé represents the two as friends whose gender differences are not immediately important. Although it is Ba's idea that they bathe together in a bid to reconcile after their brief quarrel, he is too shy to take off his clothes.



[They are in the bathroom and Ba is too shy to take off his shorts]

Batrou: Aren't you going to wash yourself? [Looking at him in surprise].What is it?

Ba: I have never bathed in front of a woman.

Batrou: I get undressed, then you refuse [challenging him with a gaze].

Ba: I just can't [smiling shyly and still covering his loin with the hands].

Batrou: [Challenging] We'll see [she begins to splash water on him playfully until he reciprocates].

This incident is represented as an innocent experience. The camera does not communicate eroticism as the viewer sees close-ups of their happy faces. The only direct erotic reference is an instant close-up of Batrou's breast and their clasped hands as Ba's eyes fall on her breasts for the first time. His gaze shows surprise at discovery. It is as if Ba is realising for the first time their differences in sex. By toning down their gender and drawing attention to the friendship from which their sexual awareness develops, Cissé, like Kaboré in *Wend Kuuni*, points to the independent value of female-male friendship. This is a value that can stand on its own and need not be always linked to marriage.

On the need for the synthesis between the modern and traditional, the director makes Kansayé join the youth in the protest to release Ba and his colleagues from jail. Before he does this, however, he seeks advice from the ancestral oracle on how to protect his grandson and secure his release. When the oracle confesses that the gods are not competent to help him solve this modern problem, he decides to confront Sangaré directly. In the confrontation between the two Sangaré tries to shoot the old man who is dressed in his magical traditional regalia, but his shot has no effect on Kansayé. In a desperate attempt to restore his authority, Sangaré orders the army to ransack and destroy the old man's home to permanently humiliate and subdue him. When Kansayé returns and finds his home in ruins, he decides to destroy his magical robe – the symbol of his traditional authority. Just as the last flames on the consumed robe are dying out, Kansayé sees a crowd of students approaching, chanting his name. They are rioting to demand for the release of Ba and his colleagues who are in prison. They have come to the old man's compound to show their



solidarity with his family. For Kansayé this is the ‘sign’ from the gods he has been waiting for. The young people are now in the lead in the struggle against modern dictatorship. This tumultuous demand for change finally leads to the release of all the students from prison and the military recall of Sangaré to answer charges to his superiors. The film ends with Ba marching out of prison and a fantasy projection of his marriage to Batrou.

The director uses costume effectively to express the need for synthesis between the old and the new. The clothes Batrou and Ba wear are symbolic in this regard. Batrou’s manner of dressing is both modern and versatile. She keeps her hair cropped. At the beginning of the film, she wears a low-cut, Western-style dress. At another point, she is seen in sportswear. At times she puts on either loose West African wear or a wrapper. Ba, on the other hand, is usually dressed in a traditional gown that distinguishes him from the rest of his colleagues, as heir to the traditional throne. The only time he is not in the garb is when he is in prison. Boughedir (1992:89) draws attention to the fact that Batrou and Ba circulate comfortably in both traditional and modern spaces as an indicator of their flexibility in adapting to different cultures and views. His observation that it is often Batrou, the daughter of a modern dictator, who goes to the spaces associated with Ba, the offspring of a traditional chief, makes sense of modernity’s search for traditional roots in an effort to be more relevant. The combination of the two characters constantly suggests synthesis and hybridity.

This desire for a new order is seen in the relentless opposition Batrou and Ba offer to Sangaré’s rule. Batrou refuses to be manipulated by her father. In a show of opposition to Sangaré, she tells him: ‘Since the day I became aware of myself as a person, I realised you and I have very different views. We don’t seem to be of the same blood’. Batrou consistently resists her father’s attempts to isolate her from her colleagues by trying to send her to study in France. She sees this as a manoeuvre to silence her. Sangaré considers France his ‘second homeland’, but Batrou sees it as a place of exile where her father wants to abandon her. Her refusal to be separated from her home country and from her ‘rebellious’ colleagues demonstrates her desire to actively contribute to ushering in change in the leadership of her country. Through her decision, Cissé implies the youth who are ‘lost’ in the West cannot be that instrumental in bringing about the needed change in the political affairs of their country. Dictators like Sangaré use such ‘study abroad’ baits to distract the youth from the crucial task of creating a more democratic society and challenging dictatorships.



In the film, Cissé shows that leaders, both in government and school administration, are not interested in the development of the youth. This is a deliberate move to disenfranchise them. The youth openly take drugs in school and in the presence of those who are supposed to be responsible for them. No measures are taken to discipline them. The students have resorted to drugs to escape from the oppression and corruption around them. Their ‘self-destruction’ suits the military government that is not interested in sober and critical youth who question poor leadership. Those ruined by drugs are those opposed to the military dictatorship and are mostly from the poorer social groups. Cissé uses several close-ups to expose the sorry state of the students whose faces are drenched in tears as they experience false joy and low moral sense. It is the traditional family of Kansayé that continually expresses concern about Ba and the youths’ habits of drug abuse. Kansayé desires that the youth, as future leaders, be saved from self-destructive behaviours.

## Portrayal of children in synthesis

In this chapter, I have made reference to a number of films in which children and young adults are used by the filmmakers to address various themes and especially articulate the filmmakers’ ‘radical’ views about gender relations. These children often question society’s values and project a future without gender discrimination. In all cultures, wherever injustice and unfairness exist, they are bound to be contested and resisted. The precolonial African past, far from being static, was characterised by forms of resistance by women against gender discrimination. Films like *Wend Kuuni* and *Tilai* eloquently illustrate this. That gender differential socialisation is an arbitrary construction that has come to be accepted as a norm by these communities, though norms are also changeable, is suggested by these filmmakers’ portrayal of children who comfortably occupy the border zones between genders. They demonstrate a tendency to cross borders, though their parents still train them to live by the gender rules. They offer, from the filmmakers’ perspectives, new paradigms for gender relations in the future as they are in search of gender parity. It is evidently the girl child who is more eager to challenge and question gender-based discrimination because she bears the brunt of it. The female child’s burst of energy in crossing gender borders is consistent with a woman’s multi-faceted style in the performance of her daily chores. In *Wend Kuuni*, Pongnere’s mother forbids her to go to the pastures just because she is female, not because going to herd the goats prevents her from performing her female gender roles. The

young girl shows that she can do more than her gender allows her to. In this regard ‘pushing the borders’ neither threatens nor destabilises the status quo as it opens up opportunities for the female to develop her other potential to put at the service of the community. The terrain for future gender equity is prepared by the filmmakers’ portrayal of sensitive male children like Samba in *Madame Brouette* and Jigi in *Finzan*, whose first-hand experiences of women’s gender-based suffering gives the reader the hope that they will grow up to become a better generation of men than their fathers. A tendency that can well be labelled ‘the ideology of innocence’ is used by filmmakers, especially when they take activist roles in challenging patriarchy in the domestic sphere. In hiding behind children’s voices, the directors make themselves more appealing in making proposals for more balanced gender relations.

These children, especially in films set in patriarchal, precolonial traditional Africa, with its tendency to rigid binary gender socialisation that discriminates against the female gender, are in search of wholeness in the community. The family, as the cells of society, is where children need greater space for self-expression and equity – a place where all can feel at home. Filmmakers challenge the dominant patriarchal authority of the father with its coercive style of communication that leaves no room for respectful dialogue with children and women. They show that the patriarchal approach, namely to resort to violence in enforcing one’s will on subordinates is increasingly becoming futile. The apparently ‘disrespectful’ attitude of children towards their parents and elders, as seen in *Tilai*, *Xala*, *Finzan* and *Finyé*, is a call to parents to create a more democratic atmosphere in the family, conducive to respectful dialogues among family members. Change is inevitable in this respect. The role children play in challenging foundational myths that are oppressive to the female gender as seen in *Moolaadé*, show that young people no longer want to follow traditions merely because their ancestors did the same. They want to understand the logic behind a practice and advocate for the right to choose, making them effective advocates for gender and human rights. Their ‘innocent’ critique of society here is difficult to ignore as their need for security and protection from physical harm are aligned with basic human rights. Their non-threatening voices force society to reflect on the values of some of their cultural practices.

In the African context wisdom is believed to reside with the aged, but in *Yaaba* and *Tilai* the children are shocked by the intolerance and lack of compassion exhibited by adults towards those who are perceived as different. They pose a challenge to the community when they accommodate those that it has marginalised and discriminated against. The filmmakers’ message of



tolerance and universal humanism comes through the children. The call against bigotry that ultimately leads to discrimination is a valid one in our contemporary society. The children stand for a more open and inclusive community where differences are accepted and respected. Where filmmakers try to address both gender and national/pan-African issues in the same film, gender is relegated to the periphery or at best subsumed into the foregrounded race and class agendas. This is evident in *Sarraounia* and *Harvest: 3 000 Years*. Because gender is mostly lived in the domestic sphere, it is not given as much primacy as race and class that are lived outside the domestic sphere and can easily mobilise support from a wider social group. Films that address specifically gender issues like *Finzan*, *Madame Brouette* and *Moolaadé*, however, articulate women's concerns with commendable sensitivity. On the whole, the filmmakers discussed here recognise gender as an important terrain for understanding the power relations in society and for addressing attendant development concerns. Traditional social practices still disgrace women. In the films discussed here, child characters are represented as the hope for the desirable gender relations.

### Endnotes

1. This is from a transcript of a lecture given by Gerima at Mount Holyoke College, 30 March 1995.
2. Sembène's films *Xala* and *Guelwaar*; Ngūgi's novels from *A Grain of Wheat* onwards; and Gamboa's war film, *The Hero* (Angola 2004) all articulate the disillusionment with postcolonial leadership that has brushed aside those who have made great sacrifices in the fight for independence from colonial administration.
3. Although some literary works set in part of the 1970s and in the 1980s depict the disillusionment with the educated elite, African artists had great hopes that the educated elite would lead the new nations to prosperity. This disappointment with the educated class that ended up aping the colonial master is powerfully captured in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).



# 3

## *Negotiating spaces within patriarchy*

### **Introduction**

African societies are predominantly patriarchal and patriarchy ensures its continuity through socialisation. Young people past the age of childhood are the most prized of the community's assets in ensuring the continuity of its ethics. The process of socialisation, started in childhood, reaches fruition when young people apply the ethos in their everyday lives and, in turn, recruit their own children to meet hegemonic expectations. Marriage is one of the institutions through which these values are transmitted. Therefore, it is expected that patriarchy would be ruthlessly harsh on the young woman or man who obstructs the 'natural' flow of its logic, when she or he is expected to be its architect. The category of 'young' women I discuss in this chapter includes, at one extreme, women of marriageable age preparing for marriage and those who are new to marriage; on the other extreme, mature women with grown children. Although there are ranges of age difference among the women in this category, what unites them is their being sexually active, a variable that does not affect women in the grandmother category as I will discuss in Chapter 4. I am interested in the dynamics of the relationships among these women and with their male counterparts (fathers, husbands and fiancés) as they negotiate their places within the enveloping patriarchal hegemony. The main protagonists in the films discussed in this chapter fall in the young women category. They pose the biggest challenge to the institution and logic of patriarchy.

As a social institution, patriarchy operates within a well-defined logic that accounts for its continuity and ubiquity in world culture (Iversen & Rosenbluth 2006). It is a socially constructed cultural system that defines power relations between the genders. Originally referring to the rule of the patriarch (the male head of a family or group) who made decisions on behalf of a group, it has come

to refer to ‘the total social organisation of gender relations, institutions and social processes which produce and reproduce women as socially, politically and sexually subordinate to men’ (O’Sullivan et al 1997:219). As a social system, patriarchy has a historical, organised and well worked-out definition of maleness and femaleness and the narrative paradigms of the communities have repeated these values for years so that they feel natural. In patriarchal logic, relations between the genders are hierarchical and the gendered socialisation emphasises this binary oppositional relationship of the subordination of women and the superiority of men. These patterns are continuously reproduced and insisted upon as natural, eternal and unchangeable. Social institutions, both formal and informal, socialise their members to reinforce distinct gender roles and differentiate between women and men.

In the first chapter of his book, *The Gender Knot: Unravelling our Patriarchal Legacy*, Allan Johnson (2005) identifies the four pillars on which the logic of patriarchy rests. It is above all, male dominance where relations between the genders are clearly hierarchical and a high premium is put on the man. Maleness is the identifying principle in the sense that what is good and desirable is seen from the male perspective. The ideals of masculinity are clearly differentiated from those of femininity and there are rigid gender boundaries between the two. In its logic of ‘reasonableness’ patriarchy accommodates exceptional women who attain success on patriarchal/masculine identification terms. A woman who enters this success ‘stream’ has to sacrifice her femininity. Among the films discussed in this book, Hondo’s Queen Sarraounia, who is a successful pan-African warrior, had her femininity sacrificed by the man who inducted her into the cult of men. Another cornerstone is male-centredness: all things revolve around the affairs of men and women and their stories are invisible. In artistic representation, it is the story of the man, the model of humanity, which is worth telling. Women feature only in relation to a man – in order to make him a hero. Feminists, both African and Western, express concern about the invisibility and marginality of the woman in artistic representations authored by men, who tend to have a blind spot when it comes to the representation of women (Ogundipe-Leslie 1984; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:2; Doane in Thornham 1999:71; Rich in Thornham 1999:45; El Saadawi 2007). The fourth point Johnson mentions is patriarchy’s obsession with control. Social life is organised around this core value, where the man is the controller and the female the controlled, lacking autonomy. Of this core value of control, Johnson (2005:15) argues that:

As a result, controllers come to see themselves as subjects who intend and decide what will happen and to see others as objects that must be acted upon. The



controlled are seen without the fullness and complexity that define them as human beings. They have no history, no dimensions to give them depth or command the controller's attention or understanding except by interfering with control.

Implied in the logic of patriarchy is the principle of resistance articulated in feminist discourses. In such a system of control, women feel oppressed and their different levels of consciousness leads them to resist male dominance; identification with the masculine that erases the vitality of the feminine identity as a positive principle; a male-centric view of society; and the control of especially women's bodies and sexuality. Feminist criticism is committed to deconstructing the patriarchal knot in which culture seems to be 'locked', by revealing 'cracks' in this hegemonic institution that are far from natural. The contest between patriarchy, as a deep-seated institution, and feminism is ongoing. As feminist perspectives reveal the contradictions within this socially constructed institution to which not all males ascribe, patriarchy has its own logic for reinventing itself and recruiting into its hegemonic fold those who would be inimical to it. The women's liberation movement often demands that women be given equal opportunities to men. Patriarchy often integrates these demands of feminists without any great shift in its sexist mindset that is embedded in the politics, economy, religion and the family – making this a continuous struggle (Johnson 2005:17). The fact that women today occupy positions that have long been the exclusive preserves of men has not really changed the male-centric perception of society. With such a diffused and deep-seated cultural institution, it is easy to be both consciously and unconsciously caught in the knot of patriarchy. The need to create a more balanced human culture where feminine agency is given its due value is the continued concern of feminists as the feminine is still on the periphery in mainstream structures. In the view of scholars such as Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006), Von Werlhof (2007), Hierro (1994) and Vaughan (2002) the feminine principle that has long been overshadowed to the disadvantage of humanity needs to be asserted to restore balance in society. The dominance of the man is never complete as it is constantly challenged in various ways. There are continuous negotiations, especially on the part of the woman, for greater equality and one of the things that work in her favour is her economic resourcefulness. Filmmakers like Sene Absa and Sembène, discussed in this book, ascribe to this view (Murphy 2000).

Correcting such a deeply rooted culture is not an easy task. Concerted efforts are required on the part of both men and women. I am convinced that not all men ascribe to the patriarchal ideology and the core values referred to above. My analysis of the selected male African filmmakers' representation of gender

relations assesses their perspectives and vision of the communities they reflect in their film. Every narrative positions the reader/viewer to receive the text in a particular way although the viewer is an active agent in the process of constructing meaning. In analysing the quality of agency given to the characters, I will be guided by a set of questions such as: Who does what? Who has power and authority? To what end is the authority directed? Who has access to resources? What is the level of cooperation/collaboration among characters? Do members of the same gender collaborate only with each other or not? Is there a growing sense of individual or communal consciousness about particular situations? What obstacles arise from the community and how are they overcome? What is the impact of the actions of individuals on the community (Omari in Mbilinyi & Omari 1996:21)?

The films I analyse span from those produced in the 1970s to the 2000s and are set in both precolonial and postcolonial Africa, to reflect continuities and discontinuities and to discuss the texture of gender debates articulated by the filmmakers. These include Dikongué-Pipa's *Muna Moto* (Cameroon 1976), Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3 000 Years* (Ethiopia 1976), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso 1982), Souleymane Cissé's *Finyé* (Mali 1982), Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and *Tilai* (Burkina Faso 1986; 1990), Med Hondo's *Sarraounia* (Mauritania 1987), Sissoko's *Finzan* (Mali 1987), Dani Kouyaté's *Sia le Rêve du Python* (Burkina Faso 2001), Sembène's *Xala* and *Moolaadé* (Senegal 1974; 2004) and Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (Senegal/Canada 2002). These films are discussed in thematic clusters.

## Dismantling patriarchal logic

The portrayal of young women in the selected films set in precolonial Africa confirms the view of African feminists that the protest against patriarchy did not start with the international women's liberation movement of the 1960s. African history has numerous examples of strong women who have challenged the oppression and the marginalisation effected by patriarchy. What the women's movement did was to provide:

one of the spaces where many different drums can be beaten to many different tunes at the same time. Consequently, women in Africa and in the diaspora can use the space as a place where they can beat their own drums as well, where they can send out and receive their own messages (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:11).

The representation of gender relations in films like *Wend Kuuni*, *Yaaba*, *Tilai* and *Muna Moto*, all set in the precolonial past, show the gendered spaces occupied



by men and women in the domestic sphere. Each gender kept to their space. The women were part of the domestic workforce who were not involved in public discussions, as seen in *Wend Kuuni*, when the community (the men) decide which family should take in Wend Kuuni as a foster child. Tinga, the father, is involved in the discussion with his peers; while Lale, the wife, receives the boy as a 'son' after a decision has been reached. The community gathering at this meeting appears to be inclusive of all males, for even young boys are in attendance. However, women are in a group apart as 'the other' and they watch from a respectful distance.

Characteristically, there is very limited and functional conversation between Tinga and Lale besides the daily exchanges of civilities. The impression created is that there is perfect peace and understanding between the couple. It is clear that, at times, Lale has divergent views, but she withholds them when she senses her husband expects silence and concord from her. Subtly, Kaboré shows an undercurrent of instability within the apparently harmonious patriarchal logic where the genders know their place and respect their limits. Lale's body language, though, shows that she is simply acting as she is expected to; what she thinks cannot be controlled by her husband. This is seen in the sequence when Tinga returns from visiting a neighbour (Bila) whose disgruntled wife (Tikpoko) leaves him because, after years of marriage, she has failed to become a mother. In a public and dramatic quarrel she blames her husband for this. This public drama that exposes his weakness is too humiliating for Bila and the community of men to take. When Tinga returns home, Lale inquires about the unhappy couple's situation. The dialogue between Tinga and Lale and the silences in it reveal the gendered dynamics of conversation. Lale is expected not to contradict her husband even if she has a different opinion from him:

- Lale: [Offering water for her husband as she kneels with head bowed] Have you seen Bila?
- Tinga: Yes, he is better.
- Lale: Ah [getting up to go, but sounding unconvinced. Her husband looks at her suspiciously].
- Tinga: He has decided to pardon Tikpoko.
- Lale: Oh! And Tikpoko? [He has finished drinking the water and she is returning to the kitchen, but she turns to listen to his response].
- Tinga: Tikpoko will return to her husband tomorrow. She has realised her mistake.
- Lale: Ah! [She is surprised by this turn of events between Bila and Tikpoko, but she suppresses her opinion].

The content of this dialogue is subverted the following day when Bila is discovered hanging from a tree. The destabilisation of the apparent order in this community is an effective critique of patriarchy's attempt to appear authoritative and in control, and especially not to admit mistakes and weaknesses in male virility. From Tinga's responses to Lale, it is Bila who has agency: he 'forgives' his wife, she 'realises her mistake', she 'will return' to him and life will go on as usual. Here is the man at the centre; the woman is supposed to do as he dictates. However, in this sequence patriarchy's attempt to re-establish itself and the status quo fails. Kaboré deliberately emphasises the apparent tranquility and harmony in this community and subtly exposes the underlying instabilities. The voice-over narrator at the beginning of the film talks about this precolonial society as living in a time of plenty – both commerce and harvests go well; respectful relationships exist between men and women, among adults and between children and adults. Emphasis is given to the cultural code of conduct in the community which appears to be normal and peaceful. Thus when this harmony is ruptured through the dramatic quarrel between Bila and Tikpoko, it is unexpected. This sudden event jolts audiences into realising that precolonial society was not really romantic. It had its own contradictions.

What Tikpoko does, accusing her husband of impotence in public, is unthinkable in the traditional African context where such a weakness on the part of the husband remains a family secret and is covered up in many ways. Fertility



is often masculinised and infertility feminised, and the woman is expected to bear the burden of a childless marriage (Odinga 2011:464). Tikpoko's public voicing of her disgruntlement in this regard resonates with the growing courage of contemporary African women whose desire for motherhood forces them to break the taboo of silence in order to attain their freedom, as discussed by Odinga. The filmmaker shifts the gender power play here in favour of Tikpoko, the young woman. She walks away from this marriage in search for another possibility to satisfy her desire for motherhood. In *Gender Socialisation*, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006) argue that in gender relations, within the context of patriarchy, male dominance is never really complete. In marriage relations power is expressed in a marriage partner's ability to walk away from the marriage for one reason or the other. Often the woman in traditional communities is disadvantaged in this regard; she rarely has the ability to walk away as she is invested in her marital home. A child would be one of the reasons why a woman would not walk away from a disagreeable marriage. In the case of Tikpoko, she does not have such a bond in this marriage. Her negotiating power and advantage lies in her youthfulness and the possibility of marrying again and having a child.

In the setting of this dramatic quarrel, men and women are positioned on opposite sides. The women try to silence Tikpoko who threatens to leave Bila for another man. Bila, on the other hand, 'struggles' to cross over to her, unable to bear her accusations. What is evident is Bila's powerlessness to control Tikpoko's outrage and this enrages him. In a way, the portrayal of Tikpoko is the development of the quieter resistance shown by Wend Kuuni's mother at the beginning of the film. Tikpoko challenges the status quo in a dramatic way – it is often women who are rejected by men on account of barrenness, not the other way round. Furthermore, Tikpoko remains in the community with her defiance uncontested. Instead it is Bila who cannot bear the public denouncement of his wife and commits suicide. The woman's resistance remains an open-ended symbol of defiance in the community. This is portrayed as something the community must become accustomed to, as an old woman comments that times have indeed changed. Bila, who cannot accept change, does not have any place in such a community.

Until Tikpoko's rebellion, the film gives a falsely linear impression. Looking beyond the apparent linearity to the structural logic of the ethnographic details opens the text to an extended reading without closure. In the words of Ukadike, Kaboré 'appropriates and then subverts the linear structure of oral narrative for maximum effect' (Ukadike 1994a:210). Just as the linearity is only apparent,



the general tranquility and harmony in this society is only superficial, especially with regard to gender relations. Some explosive outbursts and other forms of resistance keep popping up as indicators of discontent within the apparently peaceful, precolonial Africa. Wend Kuuni's mother's flight from the community to avoid being forced into a marriage she does not want and her dying in the bush in the process, presents her as another rebellious young woman. Rather than accepting the will of the community, she would rather endure being ostracised. This desire for freedom of choice is stronger than the fear of the unknown to which she fled. It was imperative for her to leave the community. Kaboré portrays this woman as extraordinary not only because of her love of freedom, but also because of her desire and hope for the return of her husband when the community has lost hope for his return and in the cure of her son, which in the woman's belief is linked to the return of her husband. She symbolises hope in difficult times. As in Kaboré's *Buud Yam* (1997), the search motif in *Wend Kuuni* stands for Africa's search for models and values from its traditional past that can guide it in contemporary times, a search for wholeness and for the regeneration of society. Wend Kuuni's father who disappeared is a hunter whose presence is felt in the film, though he is physically absent. His son, who is in the care of his mother, is ill and the wife waits for her husband in hope. The director makes the woman the principal searcher and the sacrificial bearer of hope. She constantly talks to her sick child about his father's goodness:

If your father were here we wouldn't have been so poor and you wouldn't be suffering like this. I don't feel he is dead. He may be lost ... but he will find his way and come back home. When your father arrives, he will cure you and you will be healthy again. Yes, he will return and we shall not be constrained to live like this because your father is strong and a good hunter. He will hunt and bring us food. [Then tearfully addressing her absent husband directly and repeatedly] My love, my love, come back! ... Come back home to your son and your wife because we have waited for you so long [my translation from the Italian film subtitles].

Wend Kuuni's mother dies believing in her husband's return home. After her death, the director inserts a cursory shot of a hunter in the bush. Later, this shot is vaguely repeated from Wend Kuuni's perspective as he tends goats in the fields. The woman dies outside the community that has rejected her for being different. The filmmaker makes her difference a noble one – she does not want to take another man as a husband because she believes in her own husband's return. Wend Kuuni is the one who continues her search for the lost husband/father. The voice-over narrator comments that although Wend Kuuni was adopted as a son into his new family, he still suffers from his past and cannot share his



suffering with anyone. This search which he must continue is rooted in his past. The open-ended freeze-frame that presents him in the pastures, walking forward, communicates this continuity. The ostracised mother who takes her son outside a stifling community before she dies is as much a bearer of hope as Wend Kuuni in the film. As an extended metaphor, this film shows that ‘all is not well’ with Africa. The absence of the father, the intolerance of a patriarchal community that leads to the death of the hopeful mother and the illness of the child who is temporarily ‘exiled’<sup>1</sup> all point to the challenges of the community.

In *Yaaba*, Poko, the mother of Bila, is portrayed as an assertive woman. She often objects to her husband, Kougri’s authoritarian treatment of Bila for being friendly to Sana. Poko often intervenes with a firmer authority whenever she notices her husband being too hard on Bila. In one of the dramatic and humorous quarrels between Kougri and Poko, motivated by Bila’s ‘stealing’ a chicken to feed Sana, Kougri unreasonably blames Poko for their son’s ‘bad’ behaviour because as a mother, good education is her primary role. Poko, who is angered by this accusation, retaliates by locking herself in the house and demanding an apology from her husband before she will open the door. It is amusing to see the tough-talking Kougri finally apologising. The neighbours who eavesdrop on their quarrel and peep from behind their walls are shocked to see the husband pleading remorsefully with his wife to open the door, and withdrawing his insult. Kougri’s change of tone equally surprises Poko, who listens from inside the house:

- Kougri: [Lowering his voice as he begs for forgiveness as the viewer sees a close-up of his face] Forgive me!
- Poko: [Close-up of her face: surprised but happy] What?
- Kougri: [Pleadingly] Forgive me.
- Poko: [She enjoys the sound of his remorseful tone].
- Kougri: [Close-up of his face] My love, open and I will give you gifts.
- Poko: [Only her voice is heard and a close-up of Kougri's face] You are lying.
- Kougri: [Close-up of face, pleading] I have never lied to you.
- Poko: [Smiling contentedly from inside the house] In this case I will open [getting up to open the door].
- Kougri: [Enters and the door is closed again. The two are heard chuckling happily together].

This sequence is not only important for its humour, but it also represents the constant power negotiations in the domestic sphere. In this community where the man's authority is taken for granted and where a man who asks for forgiveness is seen as weak, to get Kougri apologise is a paradigm shift that surprises both Poko and the neighbours who eavesdrop. This excerpt affirms Pfaff's (1996a:232) assertion that Poko knows how to assert her authority and maintain the balance of power between her and her husband in order to counter his obsessive authority. This balance of power and the fairness that goes with it is recognised by African scholars as a crucial feature of female identity. The mother as a balancing and unifying force is a principal feature of the African worldview, which some scholars distinguish as inherently 'mother-centred' compared to the Western perspective as predominantly 'father-centred'. The convincing view of these academics is that from the mother energies issues that transform, harmonise and integrate the community without dominating or subjugating the male factor (Diop 1978; Amadiume 1987; Nzegwu 2011). In this way, the mother's intervention often restores harmony.



In Poko, Ouédraogo represents the woman's central role as the educator in the family. Indeed, Poko reprimands and disciplines Bila whenever he does something improper. However, her style of discipline is represented as fair in contrast to her husband's style. Similarly, whenever she opposes Kougri he submits to her because of the sheer rationality of her authority. She does not share Kougri's rigid negativity towards Sana. She often disagrees with the way the men conduct the affairs of the community, but she avoids direct confrontation with them by adopting a shrewder and non-confrontational approach to achieve what she wants. For instance, she secretly requests Taryam (the traditional doctor) to treat Nopoko, after the men had unreasonably rejected him as an accomplice of Yaaba. The director uses Poko's wise decisions to criticise the attitude of Kougri and the men who have been blinded by prejudice. The portrayal of this mother figure, whose authority is contrasted with that of her husband, is aligned with Hierro's (1994) view that patriarchal logic emphasises power while feminine logic emphasises collaboration and pleasure. Both Kougri and Poko exercise authority. In this case, what distinguishes them is the purpose of the power they exercise. As Hierro (1994:182) explains:

I have referred to two moralities: the patriarchal morality, the basis of which is the logic of power understood as control, domination, serfdom and violence and the feminist morality, which follows the logic of pleasure that stems from love, nonviolence, welfare and hedonism.

These differences are evident in the way the two parents exercise power with regard to Bila, for instance. Poko's authority emerges as reasonable because it is exercised for the purpose of the greater good of all parties and does not aim to control or dominate the other. Kougri, on the other hand, is bent on emphasising his superior position as the man in the home whose word is final. It is the kind of authority that destroys rather than builds relationships.

The attitude of Kougri, the symbol of patriarchal authority in *Yaaba*, remains rigidly hostile towards Sana. Poko grows and changes when the medicine man recommended by Yaaba cures Nopoko. Like her son Bila, she begins to consider Yaaba, 'the grandmother', as the person they all need to care for. She is now in open conflict with her husband about the family's responsibility towards Yaaba; she ignores Kougri's mean prohibitions and proceeds to send the children to her bearing food for her to eat. When Kougri quarrels with his wife for wasting 'his food' on Sana, the conflict between the 'gift-giving female principle' and the 'patriarchal capitalism' (exchange) that Vaughan (2000) speaks about is dramatised. Her argument is that the gift principle is what the female identity

represents and this is the most devalued principle in both patriarchy and the capitalist economy. This principle that values caring is integral to a woman's nature as a mother and it often conflicts with the patriarchal and capitalist economy's attachment to the monetary value of all things. Because the nature of a woman's service to the community is often not valued in monetary terms, she offers her services as a gift. In Vaughan's (2000) view, the separate socialisation of the genders account for this different economies: gift and exchange (monetary) economies. When Poko tells her adamant husband, 'I will make you change!' the viewer believes in her capacity to do so. She is determined to continue 'teaching' him. Without overemphasising the point, it is clear that the director ridicules patriarchy's obsession with domination and control.

In *Yaaba*, Ouédraogo further uses the relationship between the young couple, Naoga and his wife, Koudi, to comment on another dimension of the gender-power relations in the domestic sphere. Naoga is ruined by alcohol, which in particular has a bad effect on his marital sexual life. Bila and Nopoko are drawn to Naoga because, despite his unhappiness, he is still sensitive and kind towards other marginalised members of the community. The community's negative and judgmental attitudes drive him to further drinking. The reasons for Naoga's drinking are only implied in the film. The sequence in which he returns home at night, staggering and singing, 'I have drunk... I have eaten... I am happy', explains that he uses alcohol as a form of escape. That his deterioration now saddens Nopoko and Bila, indicates he used to be different. His beautiful wife, Koudi, like Tikpoko in *Wend Kuuni*, is dissatisfied with her marriage and leaves Naoga for a new love, Razougou. Similarly, she accuses Naoga that he fails to give her sexual satisfaction and therefore it is a waste of her time to remain in a marriage that is unfulfilling for her. Koudi ends up venting her pent-up energies on a worthless village charlatan who readily takes advantage of her needs. The film ends with Koudi sneaking out of the village to join Razougou. The painful relationship between Naoga and Koudi portrays the woman as dynamic in pursuing her fulfilment; although, in this case, the filmmaker lets the young woman make a stupid decision in coupling with a man who is a cheat. The agency these young female characters demonstrate contrasts with Mulvey's revealing study of female passivity and male activity in sexual matters portrayed in Western films of the 1970s. In this film, Koudi takes the initiative as an active agent to pursue what brings her gratification and pleasure as a woman. As articulated by Nzegwu (2011) in her theory of 'Osunality'; unlike in Western ontology, the expression of sexuality in the African context is



a matter actively involving both male and female. Female sexuality as the ‘vital life force’ underlines that as much emphasis is placed on female activeness as on male prowess and the enjoyment of sexual pleasure by both is what sustains a happy marriage, as Kouidi’s rebellion shows (Nzegwu 2011:258–260).

The root cause of the disharmony in the marriage between Kouidi and Naoga can be inferred from the fact that their marriage was pre-arranged by their parents and was not necessarily based on love.<sup>2</sup> Her relationship with Razougou provokes humour and even pity for her because the viewer already knows what sort of man he is. Bila had once exposed him as the village charlatan who exploits the community by parading as a beggar. Kouidi’s preference of Razougou over Naogo emphasises one thing: her agency in seeking her sexual pleasure which she failed to realise with her husband. I appreciate Pfaff’s (1996a:232) reference to her as more progressive in her challenges than the young woman in *Wend Kuuni* only in the sense of her boldness in pursuing her pleasure. Although Kouidi’s action remains open to a wide range of interpretations, in my view, the director ridicules her choice. Furthermore, it indicates the director’s disinterest in taking an activist position in addressing gender and women-related issues.

On the whole, women as a group are portrayed as complacent in accepting their situation within patriarchy and there is no group consciousness and common purpose among them. They suffer insecurities within their families as individuals. In this patriarchal society, at times not even having given birth to three male children can grant the woman sanctuary in her marital home. This is dramatically brought out in the case of the woman whose children stone Sana at the beginning of *Yaaba*. When her husband learns what the children did and how their mother ‘stupidly’ took the children’s part in their fight with Bila, he dismisses her from his home, toget

her with ‘her’ sons. She is dismissed for having ‘transmitted her bad character into the children’ (from the film subtitles). Not even the pleas of the neighbours can stop the man from sending them away from ‘his’ home. In this incident, the viewer experiences the vulnerability of women in their marital homes, which they cannot unconditionally claim as their permanent residences. Going by Iversen and Rosenbluth’s (2006) analysis of power relations within marriage, it is the man who has the power to reject the woman and her sons, because he could take another woman. In this particular case, the director makes it difficult for the viewer to take the side of the dismissed woman. Although the step the father takes is too drastic, the viewer sees his reasonableness in not taking sides with the children just because they are his. In the communitarian African

context, good parents do not get mixed up in their children's fights (Ndofirepi & Ndofirepi 2012). They objectively reprimand both parties or are even firmer with their own children, just as Bila's father does when he finds him fighting with the same children. The woman, on the contrary, storms to the home of Bila and calls for a fight in support of her children. Ouédraogo does not play the advocate in his films. He exposes the situation and leaves it up to the audience to judge and draw conclusions. Equipping women with a political analysis of their social positioning as a group is not a major concern for him. The women who contest some of the patriarchal dictates do so as courageous individuals.

### The logic of bride price

Dikongué-Pipa's<sup>3</sup> *Muna Moto* (Child of Another) centres on the struggles of two lovers, Ngando and Ndome, to overcome a range of obstacles to their intended marriage in a patriarchal social setting. Ngando, a poor peasant, lives under the custody of his cruel uncle who, according to custom, inherited both him and his mother after the death of Ngando's father. Ngando wants to marry Ndome, but he is dependent on his uncle for the needed bride price. He works wholeheartedly for his uncle, believing in his promise to pay the bride price for Ndome, a virgin, whom the uncle secretly admires and aspires to marry as his fifth wife, in the hope of getting at least one child from her. The most important thing for him is Ndome's virginity, which is associated with fertility in many African cultures (Muller 1999). Ngando refuses his proposal to give up Ndome in exchange for two women and later to inherit her after his uncle's death. The uncle finds an immediate ally in Ndome's father, who is willing to give his daughter to the 'highest bidder'. Ndome, however, is actively committed to struggling against this arrangement. To foil the plans of the men, she sacrifices her virginity to Ngando, as she is convinced this will prevent Ngando's uncle from taking her as a wife and her own father would be constrained to demand a smaller bride price from Ngando for the same reason. Her plans, however, are thwarted and Ngando's uncle, using double standards, proceeds to marry Ndome even though she is expecting Ngando's child. The fact that she is expecting a baby is an added bonus for the unscrupulous uncle who is aware of his impotence even if he lives in public denial of the fact. As an African man to whom impotence is like a death sentence, he would do anything to redeem his name even if this means appropriating somebody's child as his own (Odinga 2011).



*Muna Moto* represents the issue of marriage in an African society where a rich man can get any woman he thinks is useful for his purpose. In the film, the power of money to buy the woman, not love, is what the director provocatively draws attention to. In many traditional African societies, the items used for ‘payment’ of dowry are of symbolic and of little monetary value (Kanogo 2005). These items are part of the family heritage used exclusively for bride wealth. Dikongué-Pipa in effect criticises the greed that comes with the use of money as a form of dowry. This reinforces the view of Africanist scholars that the monetisation of dowry that has come with colonialism has significantly contributed to the devaluation and objectification of African women (Amadiume 1987; Oyewumi in Ashcroft et al 2011:258–259). In the film, the man who is in love, but cannot pay the excessive bride price, has no chance and the young woman’s choice in this regard is totally irrelevant. In effect, Ndome is forced to marry the man she does not love because her father already ‘sold’ her when he received the gifts and bride wealth from Ngando’s uncle.

Dikongué-Pipa denounces the perversion of marriage in society. It has turned into a collusion between the patriarchal heads of families for selfish motives. His unequivocal exposition of the situation of women in this society makes the viewer question the practices of forced marriage, an excessive bride price and wife inheritance. The dramatic injustice represented in the film is a convincing ‘parable on the dowry system and women’s place in society’ (Ukadike 1994:186). The film argues for the need to resist oppressive institutions that stand in the way of love. Ndome and Ngando demonstrate indomitable willpower in struggling for the love they value. Although the film ends with Ngando in prison for protesting the uncle’s forceful taking of his own child, Ndome is seen seated in front of the Palace of Justice pressing for fairness in their case. In this open-ended conclusion, one can only hope for fairness in the future.

### **Female control and forms of protest**

The culture demands that Ngando’s uncle assume responsibility for both Ngando and his mother after the death of his brother. However, he treats them as mere labourers in his homestead. The director emphasises the heavy cultural burden put on Ngando to marry Ndome. He does all sorts of odd jobs to raise the bride price and buys her presents as custom demands. Ndome supports Ngando’s struggles to win her in various ways and she is prepared to wait and help him raise the bride price. She values her virginity and wants the traditional, public proof displayed on her wedding day. This is a value on which many traditional

patriarchal cultures, beyond Africa, put a great premium. In the context of Africa, virginity is linked to the payment of dowry. The community sees the woman's value in her virginity, just as the young woman holds this value as her greatest honour. The pressure this value puts on the young woman, as seen in the practice of virginity displays among the Zulu and Swazi for instance (Hugo 2012; Khumalo 2012) is similar to that of female excision (Hersh 1998). They are all forms of controlling female sexuality through patriarchal practices, made sacrosanct by myths. Ndome's rebellion is seen when she uses this value to defend her love for Ngando, which is threatened by patriarchy. Her proposal to lose her virginity shocks even Ngando on whose behalf she makes this sacrifice of her honour and that of her family.

Ndome is portrayed as realising before Ngando that his uncle cannot be trusted. The first time Ngando takes her home to be introduced to the uncle, she ends up slapping him in the face for touching her disrespectfully. Her reaction surprises Ngando, who thinks she is tactless and should have accommodated the moves of the man who is going to pay her bride price. Ndome's ability to analyse the dynamics in the situation contrasts with Ngando's. She challenges him to raise the money for the bride price himself instead of naively depending on another man. It is too late when Ngando realises that the one who pays the bride price is the one who controls the woman. I explain Ngando's naivety through his positioning as a man within the patriarchal structure, where he cannot see the situation from the perspective of a young woman, positioned on its periphery. In telling her to be more accommodating towards his uncle, Ngando's attitude frames the woman as family property that is at the disposal of all, just as his uncle does when he suggests that Ngando could inherit Ndome after his death. Ndome's double struggle as a partner with Ngando against the greedy uncle and as a woman against both men (patriarchy) is an evident case of women's 'double colonialism' that feminists speak about (Oyewumi in Ashcroft et al 2011:257). Their varied positioning in this social context makes them interpret the same situation differently. Dikongué-Pipa portrays the force of patriarchy as too strong for Ndome and Ngando who appear to be fighting on the same side. They are portrayed as just two individuals fighting against an embedded tradition. In a sequence where a group of men forcefully kidnap Ndome to be taken to Ngando's uncle as his fifth wife, the director demonstrates her dilemma and confusion through the erratic movement of the hand-held camera that gives a nightmarish effect. Ngando stands helplessly by and Ndome does not know who to run to for help as the difference between Ngando and the other men appears blurred. Once she is married and has a child, Ndome's importance as a



wife (a human being) ceases. In a dialogue between Ngando and the uncle, the former tells Ngando that the only reason people marry is to have children.

As the film's title suggests, the major struggle between Ngando and his uncle shifts to the ownership of the child; Ndome, the woman, is forgotten in the background. The question of 'woman' as a human value disconnected from motherhood is alluded to here. As mentioned earlier by Ngcobo, respect for the mother is linked to her role as childbearer rather than to herself as an individual. The woman can perform the formidable role of motherhood from the outside, as she remains marginalised in patriarchy (Ngcobo 2007). Contrasted to Ngando, Ndome continues to see him as the man she loves and fights for. When Mbello, the 'idiot',<sup>4</sup> advises Ngando to leave the community in protest because of his uncle's forced marriage to Ndome, he refuses to leave because he 'cannot leave his child and his mother behind' (from the film subtitles). As part of the patriarchal order, Ngando is, perhaps unconsciously, still too committed to the status quo to want to leave the community. He cannot walk away from this community in which his stakes are tied to the patriarchal logic. This dilemma of Ngando becomes clearer after the vivid dream sequence in which his dead father advises him to accept his condition. The dream helps to resettle Ngando within the social structure. His struggle ultimately does not challenge the establishment; he seeks to settle the score with his uncle about the ownership of the child. The patriarchal hierarchy is realistically portrayed as overbearing with regard to gender relations. Ngando and his uncle can easily reach an understanding within this structure as they belong to the same patriarchal family. As Hierro (1994) states, power is a group thing and Ngando belongs to the group who has power even if he is at present struggling with his uncle.

Men are the heirs of patriarchal power. They are born to occupy positions of power and prestige. For that purpose they are educated in their families and at school. The young ones will relieve the old. Sons will relieve fathers....

Patriarchal Power can be analysed as women's marginalization (Hierro 1994:178).

In a non-obtrusive way, the director shows the different perspectives men and women have on marriage in the context of patriarchy. The four wives of Ngando's uncle are represented both as a group and as individuals. We often see them as a group working together in the field or doing domestic chores. Dikongué-Pipa draws attention to their value as a ready labour force within the family structure. Their individuality is not important, as they do not even have proper names besides the order of their marriage to the uncle. They are usually silent in the presence of their husband who treats them with utter contempt. Their silence, however, is an aggressive hush of resistance. The director uses an

effective series of close-ups of their hostile gazes to communicate their impotent anger and defiance. Their gazes evoke sympathy and protest in the viewer at the same time. This is particularly seen where Ngando's uncle expresses his disappointment in his four 'idiotic' and 'barren wives' who have failed to give him children and therefore give him reason to take a fifth wife. In alternate shots that represent the two parties as opponents, the uncle is seated on one side of the room and the women on the opposite side. The sad expressions on their faces clearly show who is really to be pitied for not having children. He presents the women to Ngando, one by one, each with her 'defect'. In his deprecating and callous tone, he treats them like specimens. In his corpulence, captured at a slightly low camera angle, he delivers his criticism as he continues to gorge himself on the food and drink the women have provided. He calls them 'witches' who have made him miserable. His treatment of these women portrays them as 'his wives' who have remained 'outsiders' within this family structure. The day Ndome joins the family as the fifth wife, her co-wives are all taken by surprise. Clearly, their opinions do not matter to their husband. In calling all four women 'barren', including Ngando's mother, Dikongué-Pipa dramatically points at and ridicules the impotent husband.

Despite patriarchy's efforts to subjugate and control women, *Muna Moto* portrays the woman's rebellion and transgression of the regulations in various ways. Ngando's uncle refers to one of his wives as 'the worst of all, idiotic and barren', because he knows she cheats on him. She expresses her dissatisfaction with her sexual life by seeking extramarital affairs. In one of the sequences, Mbello, the village 'idiot', sees her sneak into the bushes with a man and he makes a comment that shows both his sympathy and disappointment with women at the same time. He pities the woman who will certainly be beaten 'again' for her action and he is also disappointed in the social system that demands an exorbitant bride price to acquire a woman and yet, as Mbello says, 'women cannot be trusted' to be faithful. This comment, from one of the marginal characters in the film, questions the logic of a bride price that reduces women to the status of property to be controlled by their owners (men). Like Ndome, he advises Ngando not to depend on his uncle to buy him a wife, for the one who pays for a woman has rights over her. And why insist on marrying a virgin like Ndome if it costs so much, instead of a less costly woman, he advises Ngando. In posing these apparently simplistic questions, the 'idiot' opens fundamental questions on traditional Africans' obsession with the bride price and women's virginity before marriage (Bagnol & Mariano 2011). His questions, that have no answers in the film, challenge audiences to think critically about the logic of patriarchy.



This critique establishes a link between the bride price system and the objectification of women. The outcome in this case is unsatisfactory for both men and women: the man would like to have full control because he has paid an exorbitant dowry for the woman and the woman would like to break free from such control. Feminists and gender and human rights activists have often brought attention to the issue of the bride price among the cultural practices that oppress and subjugate women who transfer their rights to the man and lose the right to walk out of marriages even when they turn oppressive. The practice of asking a bride price has consequently been associated with violence. To varying degrees, both men and women are oppressed by this cultural practice that is heavily monetised today. The Uganda Constitutional Assembly, for instance, debated this issue heatedly, though the decision to abolish the bride price was not reached; only consensus was reached against the abuse of this cultural practice which was meant to cement relationships and friendships. There were clear gender divisions in the discussions. On the whole, men did not want the law to be abolished, while women voted for the abolishment because they find it oppressive. On the submission that a clause be added to the effect that the man and woman share the property equally on the dissolution of the marriage (which was opposed by the majority of the men), the submission of one of the men shows that the monetisation of marriage through the bride price makes it impossible for men and women to share property equally.

[W]hen marriages are contracted there is a dowry element and the young man getting married is charged very highly. For instance, in [one community] they ask the young man to pay over 100 heads of cattle. Now, if the marriage is dissolved and according to the Law we would want to pass now, who would benefit now if the property you will have acquired during your marriage is to be shared? What about the dowry paid? How will you recover it? Should we include in this Clause that we deduct the amount of dowry that was paid first? (Etonu in Mujuzi 2010).

This submission in a constitutional debate clearly shows how hard it is for a woman for whom such an exorbitant bride price has been paid to be treated as an equal.

Dikongué-Pipa, in this respect, portrays marriage as the definitive ceremony of objectification for the woman. This is seen in Ngando's uncle's treatment of his wives: he sees them in terms of his needs for a labour force, food and sex. In a flashback sequence he gives an order to his fourth wife who is seated with her co-wives, silently cracking groundnuts, to follow him to his inner room to 'give him' sex. When he is done with her, she joins the rest of the women whose hostile gazes tell how much they loathe their situation. The women's potential

to rebel against their husband is shown when he emerges from the inner room and speaks into the air, demanding a drink. The women all remain silent and none respond to his need. It is finally the oldest woman, Ngando's mother, who silently offers him a drink as the rest of the women look on with hostility. However much a person may be debased, the capacity to assert one's human dignity is indelible. This is delicately sustained in the often-silent resistance of the four wives. Patriarchy can only succeed, as Johnson (2005) correctly points out, as long as women are willing to embrace their subordination. Embedded in any oppressive institution is always the potential to rebel, making oppression 'inherently unstable' and 'dominant groups vulnerable' (Johnson 2005:103).

The fourth wife's derisive laughter and words during the traditional welcome dance for Ndome, the new bride, shows the women's capacity for defiance. The fourth wife sings her own song in derision of her husband, exposing his impotence and the fact that he has not married a virgin after all, because 'Ngando got there before' (from the film's subtitles). In this final outburst of the woman, the director demonstrates how, in their silence, the women see through the 'authority' of their husband and ridicule it. The fourth wife experiences what Fiske refers to as the 'disruptive' pleasure of the weak that challenges patriarchal power and control. From her weak social position, she cannot afford a head-on collision with power and so she uses the guerrilla tactics of the weak, expressed in her disdainful song (Fiske 1997:228).

Ndome's protest against marrying Ngando's uncle is even more pointed. Not even her father's authority and physical violence can subdue her into accepting the engagement gift from the man she detests. Her defiance is seen in her flinging the gift back at the men and her hostile gaze deflates her father's authority to control her; driving him to unleash physical violence on her. This shows how useless patriarchy is in its effort at absolute control. The subversive nature of Ndome's outrageous decision to lose her virginity as a direct challenge to patriarchy is heightened by the fact that it comes immediately after her father's frantic assertion of his authority over her.

The indomitable will of this female protagonist who protests against oppressive traditions in the institution of marriage is similar to Sissoko's portrayal of Nanyuma in *Finzan*. When her elderly husband dies after only eight years of marriage, she fights the tradition of wife inheritance. Bengali, her old-time boyfriend, now a widower interested in her, joins to fight for their happiness. Their protest fails to mobilise the support of the community to challenge the status quo. In this case, the patriarchal system cannot allow the established bond between the two families to break after the death of the



man because women are seen as part of the exchange cementing such social relations. This affirms Levi-Strauss's comment on the position of women in marital transactions within patriarchy as an exchange between men for building bonds among families.

The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners... This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as, moreover, is usually the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature (Levi-Strauss 1969:161).

This explanation fits into the situations of Nanyuma and Ndomé reflected in these films. This 'transaction' or 'exchange' is what Vaughan (2002) describes as central to patriarchy, which operates on exchange/capitalist principles. It is calculated and knows only the law of exchange as it is incapable of appreciating the principle of 'gift' or 'gifting' which defines the feminine principle. When Nanyuma flees from the village to the city, thinking her city-based brother-in-law would be more understanding, his matter-of-fact response is shocking as he orders her to return to the village.

You are crazy to reject our tradition. Don't you know that everything concerning you has already been established? The first wife of your husband is mine, the second is Tiefing's and you are Bala's! Tomorrow you will go back to Sabuga to marry Bala.

This calculating patriarchal logic of wife inheritance notwithstanding, courageous women like these fictional characters have often contested their ritual and automatic inheritance by a brother-in-law or a close relation of their deceased husband, as Tsanga's (2011) research shows.

Like Ndomé in *Muna Moto*, Nanyuma's refusal to marry the man chosen for her by her father does not prevent the marriage from taking place. In this context, 'the preferred female sexuality in patriarchy is one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response' (Rubin in Rivkin & Ryan 1999:547). Because Nanyuma stands alone, she realises she cannot bring about fundamental change in the community. Having traversed both the city and the village to seek redress for her case without success, the only option left for her is to leave the community just like Wend Kuuni's mother does in *Wend Kuuni*. The words she utters as she walks away and the high camera angle emphasise her oppression in this closed community. The idea of women as 'homeless' comes through her final militant words, tinged with disenchantment:

The world comes from our wombs. It mistreats us. We give life and we're not allowed to live. We produce the food crops and others eat without us. We create wealth and it is used against us. We women are like birds with no branch to perch on. There's no hope. All that's left is we must stand up and tie our belts. The progress of our society is linked to our emancipation.

As Foucault's explanations of agency and resistance demonstrate, humans relate to power in dynamic ways. No one tells the other how to be, what to do, or even what to think. When one understands how society works, one acts to determine what to be (Foucault 1966–84:310,312). This is what these young women who resist patriarchy do to gain agency and take control of their lives.

### **Male perspectives of marriage within patriarchy**

*Muna Moto* uses Ngando's uncle and Ndome's father to sound a pungent criticism of patriarchy and women's position in it with respect to marriage. The sensuousness and impotence of Ngando's ever-complaining uncle is effectively used to provoke audiences to see the abusive side of the system. The director uses self-criticism when he makes Ngando's uncle articulate his selfish ethics to provocatively taunt Ngando as a financially insufficient man when he tells him that the man who has the money should have the woman he wants.

A woman is like an ear of corn, if you have teeth you can bite it. Where will you have 100 000 francs cash, 4 crates of whisky, 20 she-goats, 10 crates of wine, 20 sacks of rice of 100 kilos each, 15 bottles of best rum, a 7-metre fishing boat, 60 bags of salt, 11 kilograms each, 30 kilos of leaf of tobacco, 100 bales of cloth, 10 litres of palm oil, 3 crates of soap?

This lengthy list of requirements to get a wife shows the excessive material obstacles put in the way of genuine love that leave little room for 'small' people to marry for love (Ayari 1996:182; Ukadike 1994:187). When Ngando's uncle proves to be the more financially capable, it becomes easy for Ndome's father to change his mind. The uncle overrides Ngando when he presents his intention to Ndome's family after the young people's formal engagement. His argument is that a girl should have more suitors so that her father can make the final decision on who is the most suitable in monetary terms. The unscrupulousness of the two patriarchs is evident when it comes to their mutual benefit. What is important for the uncle is that Ndome marries into the same family. Should he die, she will take Ngando, his nephew. This transaction basically takes place between the two men, in the silent presence of Ndome's mother. When the elderly woman breaks her silence and timidly interrupts the men's discussion, it is to ask whether it might not be wise to ask Ndome's opinion, since the marriage is about her. This is



a daring interjection in the social context. The father snaps back authoritatively, ‘She has no say!’ but his views are soon undermined by Ndome’s revolt. At different points in the film both patriarchs emphasise that they are the points of authority in their households. When Ndome’s father pronounces himself on the decision he has made on her behalf, the following phrases he uses reveal his nervousness because it is no longer a given that Ndome will obey him. At different times, he asserts his authority saying: ‘There is only one law in this house and that is mine’. ‘She will marry the man I choose. That is final’. ‘Ndome, watch out; I am your father and you will obey me’. He desperately repeats this as a mantra to convince himself that he still has authority.

In this society the value of a marriageable girl lies in the dowry she brings to her father. In the flashback to Ndome’s engagement ceremony to Ngando, her father is the central figure in the negotiations. He blesses his daughter who ritually changes hands from father to future husband and he gives her the imperative to obey her husband and stand by him in all things. As Ndome takes the ritual drink to Ngando, her beloved, her father clearly underrates the latter’s economic sufficiency and addresses a cautionary, proverbial warning to the men at the ceremony:

Brothers, we cast our nets, but we do not know what fish we catch. When the catch is big, it is good for the whole community. A marriageable daughter is a big catch. I don’t know if the suitor is equal to the task. I suffered a lot to marry her mother and bring the child up.

As the camera focuses on the hard, expressionless face of Ndome during this ceremony, the director edits in the boisterous laughter of the men in the background. The contrast between Ndome’s face and the animated noise of the men reveals her insecurity in the lifestyle she is stepping into. The two genders occupy different positions with regard to marriage. The father expects a fair return on his ‘good’ – Ndome – as he now claims every credit for her upbringing. The mother, the main educator, is completely ignored in this crucial moment and Ndome feels like a victim.

## Questioning foundational myths and traditions

The ideologies embedded in foundational myths have an encompassing power over members of a community. They affect and influence the worldview of the community to such an extent that they become inviolable and difficult to challenge (Campbell 1991; Leeming 1992). The films I discuss in this section question community rituals that have deep cultural roots, though many of these

practices have today come to be seen as oppressive and contrary to human rights. Western societies that have practised similar cultures have now evolved out of them as the value of human rights has illuminated their perspectives on these rituals. Some of these cultural practices that conflict with human rights and particularly affect women, are associated with the control of their sexuality. The sacrificing of virgins to bring good fortune to the community in times of calamity and female excision are the two foundational myths I will discuss here. That the filmmakers bring these issues up for discussion show their concern and commitment to eradicating practices which discriminate against women. The films discussed here are forms of activism aiming to advance women's cause. As Mubangizi's research on the clash between culture and human rights in South Africa observes, these practices are really about women's disadvantaged positions within patriarchy and their weak bargaining power.

The practices are generally rooted in a culture of discrimination against women and as violations of human rights they function as instruments for socializing women into prescribed gender roles ... and socializing men into a particular facet of masculinity vis-à-vis these practices – which in turn promotes their perpetuation. The cultural practices concerned are also linked to the unequal position of women in political, social and economic structures of the society where they are practiced and represent a particular society's control over women (Mubangizi 2012:34).

I begin my discussion with Dani Kouyaté's<sup>5</sup> *Sia, le Rêve du Python* (2001).

### **Female-virgin sacrifice for community wellbeing**

Dani Kouyaté's *Sia, le Rêve du Python* (Burkina Faso 2001) is a metaphoric film that, like *Guimba the Tyrant*, *Yeelen* and *Moolaadé*, uses myth and legend as platforms to reflect on contemporary power relations in Africa. In all these films, there is a close relationship between the past and the present, especially in relation to power sharing among the genders. *Sia* continues the argument, similar to that in *Guimba* and *Moolaadé*, that hegemonic masculinity cannot claim total control over marginalised groups. Speaking about the reason for making this film, which is an adaptation of a play by a Mauritanian playwright, Moussa Diagana, Kouyaté (2001) comments:

I have applied myself to the reasons for the inner battles which have bloodied Africa, looking for the causes (not again slavery and colonialism) but going well beyond, questioning our foundational myths. Myths which, sometimes, contain pernicious closes of totalitarianism, have their share of responsibility to assume. *Sia, le Rêve du Python* comes from the legend of Wagadu, the founding myth of the pre-Nandingue people, to become a universally political fable.



This Wagadu foundational myth tells how the most beautiful virgin girl in the land is, from time to time, selected by the Python god and ritualistically offered in exchange for prosperity for the entire community.<sup>6</sup> The will of the Python god is mediated through the institution of priesthood. The priests are a privileged, elite social group whose esoteric rituals, as sanctioned by the oracle, have the blessing of the state, represented by the Kaya Maghan (the emperor). To think differently from the priests is tantamount to blasphemy and is punishable by death. This ritual sacrifice has come to be accepted as necessary for the wellbeing of the community and has continued unchallenged for generations. If there are questions in the minds of some in the community, they are muffled. The family upon which the honour of finding the beautiful virgin falls, is considered noble and heroic for not resisting the will of the Python god and is consequently rewarded either with bags of gold equivalent to the weight of the virgin, or some high-ranking office. Sia Yatabere, a young woman with a strong desire to live and the betrothed of Mamadi, a young soldier leading an army in battle, becomes the honourable virgin found worthy as a sacrifice to the Python god.



*Sia 1: Sia is being prepared for the sacrifice to the Python god as a scapegoat for the community.*



*Sia 2: After her rape, the men plead with her to keep silent to sustain a new power myth.*

Mamadi's uncle, Wakhane, the commander of the army, whose own daughter, 'Little Mother', had previously been sacrificed to the same Python god, proposes that another virgin be found because Sia is already betrothed. This would be like robbing Mamadi of what has already been promised him. But if this is not possible, he begs the priests to let Mamadi bid Sia farewell before she is sacrificed. This is too much for the priests to take from one so high up in the ranks: they accuse Wakhane of blasphemy.

When the news of Sia's choice is being delivered to the Yatabere family, Sia overhears the conversation between her parents and Balla, the griot, and bolts off into the night. It is worth noting that the message is principally delivered to

Yatabere, Sia's father. The views of Sia and her mother are not important in this male, hegemonic decision. The gender socialisation process makes the women accept their non-decision making position as a given (De Lauretis 1999:714); although these marginalised women try to resist the system in different ways. The women who are the victims in this ritual are ideologically constructed as 'saviours of the community'.

The search for Sia involves the unleashing of the coercive state apparatuses and finally handing her over to the priests for the sacrifice. People have been coerced to cooperate, nobody does so willingly. The resistance of the subordinate groups intensifies the coercive force of the state. Subversive actions that challenge the establishment are in sync with actions that reinforce the status quo. Wakhane, one of the key functionaries, openly challenges the orders of the priests. Responding from the depth of his humanity, he arranges a secret meeting between Mamadi and Sia before she is delivered to the priests. Although he knows where Sia is hidden, he delays the moment of her capture until Mamadi arrives from the front to take leave of her. However, Wakhane, who is a core member of the hegemonous society, can only bend the rules a little. When Mamadi challenges Wakhane to kill the Python god himself for robbing him of Sia, Wakhane is compelled to imprison him even though Mamadi is his nephew. He considers himself a statesman first even when handling family matters. To emphasise how he plays down family connections in the interest of national duties, the director occasionally shows Wakhane's wife's attempts to plead with him, the commander-in-chief, to be more humane towards his family. The wife is often framed behind him to underline his dominant masculine stance. As expected, he continually ignores his wife's timid interventions to be a little lenient to family members.

Notwithstanding his faithfulness to the state, Wakhane is accused of plotting a coup d'état. This accusation from the priests breaks his back; he has already sacrificed too much for a state that does not appreciate him. He and Mamadi decide to plan the overthrow of the state and to save Sia from the Python god by killing it. As Sia is being handed over to the seven priests in a solemn religious procession, Mamadi and his army pursue them to rescue her. They arrive too late to prevent her ritual rape by the priests, but are just in time to rescue her from being taken into the cave where she would have been left to die like several virgins did before her. This is the point of rupture in the Python god myth, a myth that has been put in place to mystify power and make it obscure so that a few men can control it.



The new hegemony formed under Wakhane's adept guidance is based on the old lie. In order to turn Mamadi into the new hero, who is now presented as the 'slayer' of the Python god, more massacres have to be effected to construct the new myth. The secret of the non-existence of the Python god must be kept at all costs, to perpetuate the mysterious nature of power. This can only happen if the secret remains in the hands of a few. For political expediency, the valiant soldiers who rescued Sia must die: for political truth cannot be in the hands of too many people and power must remain mysterious and esoteric. As the 'new' order constructs its own myth, Sia's feelings and trauma as the victim of 'gang rape' have no political importance. It is relegated to the private sphere as Wakhane advises Mamadi to persuade her to cooperate. The new myth catches up with the naive masses' enthusiasm for celebrating heroes. Driven mad by the state's insensitivity, Sia nonetheless remains a threat to the new hegemony. She refuses to be gagged into accepting the title of 'queen' in exchange for a lie. The film ends in a subversive, mind-probing manner. Sia's emergence from the royal chambers, at the time the crowd is waiting to applaud her as queen, is a deconstruction of the state's version of the truth. She presents herself to the public just as Balla, the griot, is giving the official communication that explains away her failure to come out to greet the people. Her appearance erases Balla's false explanation and jolts the crowd. When Sia publicly strips off the regal attire and walks away from the palace into the streets of a modern city, naked as a madwoman, the audience begins to question whether they have reason to celebrate the 'new' regime. At the end of the film the apathetic masses begin to realise that the new set of leaders have simply replaced the previous ones, but that nothing has essentially changed. The dominant features of masculinity remain unchanged as a root paradigm of society.

Resistance to this 'new' hegemony begins to form on the day of its inauguration. This clearly shows the link between crude power and resistance, and the past and the present in gender relations. Sia's presence is a strong feminist statement in the films. She refuses to treat her rape by officials of the state as a private matter to be dealt with in the domestic sphere. Her position articulates the feminist agenda that the 'personal is political' (Obiora 1997) – a phrase that is particularly relevant to this film. I quote from Seyla Benhabib's reading of Hannah Arendt's concept of the public space that explains the situation in this sequence.

Violence can occur in private and in public, but its language is essentially private because it is the language of pain. Force, like violence, can be located in both realms. In a way, it has no language and nature remains its quintessential

source. It moves without having to persuade or to hurt. Power, however, is the only force that emanates from action and it comes from the mutual action of a group of human beings: once in action, one can make things happen, thus becoming the source of a different kind of 'force' (Benhabib 1993:102).

The private pain Sia experiences would be absolute had she accepted the role of queen. Her refusal initiates a new chain of action that in a way counters Mamadi's.

The power of this film lies in its timelessness. Commenting on the character of Sia, Kouyaté describes her to be as universal as Antigone who stands against the state, or Iphigenia, who refuses to be sacrificed to the gods. She represents the desire for life, truth and freedom. 'Victim'-like characters – especially women – are given agency over most of their male counterparts. Although Kerfa, the madman, is the most hostile and outspoken in his condemnation of the regime, his 'madness' protects him from the state functionaries. The rest of the marginal people use more subtle forms of protest. For instance, the griot's official announcements are juxtaposed with challenging songs of the people by a griot: 'Do not fear death! Death spares no one. If you are afraid, you will die. Even if unafraid, you will die just the same'. The regime threatens with death whenever someone expresses an oppositional view, but this does not stop the people. The camera pans the sad faces of apparently helpless people as the female singer's voice pierces the air. These ordinary people are portrayed as unafraid of the state's death threats. This particular song is interfaced with the official griot's announcement of gifts of gold for whoever finds Sia. The silences and expressionless faces of the people, in close-up, juxtaposed with this announcement are suddenly interrupted by another song in which the griot protests human sacrifice. These songs work as subversions to the official position of the state. In the emperor's court itself, not all the councillors are of one accord. The close-up reaction shots show the lack of enthusiasm about the continued sacrifice of virgins, though fear muffles their expressions. Though the 'ears' of the state are everywhere, the men at the barber's shop still dare express their opinion about the brutality of the regime. When some of them are arrested and tortured, the 'manly' ones among them neither cry out nor plead for mercy. They stand against the 'lily-livered' who cringe 'like women'. Even where the characters keep silent, this is as a result of expediency rather than consent.

The difference between how men and women react to the autocratic regime of Kaya Maghan is remarkable. Sia's father and mother take the news of their daughter being chosen as the sacrifice differently. The father is rather quick to take the 'honour' and 'nobility' bait. He is more acquiescent and tells his



protesting wife that their daughter's death is honourable. Besides, all will die one day and she will be neither the first, nor the last. Such fatalistic responses sustain the oppressive system. Before Sia runs away, her father pleads with her to cooperate with the state. As a man, he is positioned as an 'insider' in this patriarchal setup. The role of the victim the woman plays here is glamorised as 'honour'. Sia's mother and the rest of the women see things differently. Their body language betrays their hostile attitudes: Sia's mother jeers at the men who come to search for her daughter; Sia's grandmother spits contemptuously at them; Penda, Sia's friend, lashes out with insults and refuses to bow before them. She insults the soldiers as a 'bunch of cowards', an insult that hurts their masculine ego as they are the bearers of weapons. In defying the state's death threats, Penda fearlessly offers herself in the place of Sia. The women, as a group, state that they would rather die than tell the soldiers where Sia is even if they knew where she was. Playing on their male egos, Penda refers to all the people innocently arrested as having 'balls' and their tormenters as having none. Manliness and masculinity are deconstructed by these female characters who challenge the regime. It is interesting to note that the men often cover up the comments of these women by locking them up as possessed or mad. Sia's father goes straight on his knees before the commander and begs him to treat his wife's words as those of a madwoman when she challenges Wakhane that, 'In this land, bastards have a name. We ought to find one for unworthy fathers!' Wakhane, who knows that she is alluding to his sacrifice of his own daughter, orders the release of those arrested to the shock of the soldiers. The director uses contrasting camera angles for the father and mother of Sia. His submissiveness is emphasised by the slightly high camera angle, whereas the challenging mother's empowered position is communicated by the low angle. Within the palace itself, Kaya Maghan's queen repeatedly warns her husband that inflexible authority cannot survive and that turning his functionaries into a brood of 'yes-men' will eventually turn the tide against him. It is too late when the emperor wakes up to heed her advice. Even if these women's views are ignored by the menfolk, the filmmaker suggests that the exclusion of the feminine factor from the hegemonic structure impoverishes and saddens society. This feminine principle, in the words of Vaughan (1983), is the natural way that has been subverted by the constructed culture of masculinity under patriarchy. For its own good, society needs to give it room. She argues on behalf of women that:

It has been part of the men's ways to define women and to cloud our perception of ourselves, making us think that theirs was the only reality and that we were

not really doing anything. But the fact that we participate in a distinctive mode is being revealed to us as feminism spreads and intensifies. Our alternative way, hidden in our housework, has an enormous potential as a model. Recognizing, re-evaluating and following it can solve the atrocious problems, which have been created by the sometimes unbridled negative behaviour patterns that the male way has created. It is therefore being revealed as already existing, not invented and imposed from above by a restricted elite (Vaughan 1983).

Sia stands apart from the naive masses as the one who inherits Kerfa's madness after his murder by the state. It is significant that Wakhane orders the killing of Kerfa after Sia has attained consciousness, to express that the truth cannot be killed. She wears his garb and becomes an icon of truth in her madness, just like Kerfa had been. Even if this truth still ironically resides in a 'madwoman' whose testimony the community cannot take seriously, the state is aware of what Sia knows and lives in fear of her. Just as Kaya Maghan was terrified by Kerfa's crazy (but true) pronouncements, there will be no peace for the new emperor, whose mad 'fiancée' is now on the streets. Her crazy voice will always remind him of how false his heroism is. Sia, who laughs in Mamadi's face, describes him as 'dead from the very beginning' of his regime. The hope for the truth to triumph, though distant, remains alive. The film ends with the community's doubts about hero worship, as Sia, the would-be queen, hits the streets of a modern city as a madwoman, singing the same menacing song of the madman who initiated her. What the director says about the value of the madness he equips his protagonists with is worth noting. In an interview with Olivier Barlet, Kouyaté underlines the importance of having such 'madmen' like Kerfa in society. The madmen are like the artists who must speak the truth, whatever the cost. They need to find the best means of doing so, so that they can be heard, in spite of their 'madness'. His view is that 'madness' itself is important for artists; they cannot achieve consistency without 'folly'. Without folly they remain banal (Barlet 2001). Indeed, to challenge a foundational myth, one has to be 'mad' in the sense of having the courage to bear the truth. Kouyaté's view corresponds with that of the poet, Niyi Osundare, when he explains what it means for an artist to work in the context of a repressive political regime. In this context, insanity becomes the dynamic stance showing the way out for society.

Freedom is vital for the creative enterprise as oxygen is to a living organism. That enterprise can only flower and flourish when the creative spirit has the liberty to dare, venture, argue, make mistakes, lose and discover itself in the rapture of being and becoming. It can only flourish when it has the liberty to contemplate (for the spirit that can contemplate is the one that can anticipate), ruminate, brood,



dream, navigate the threshold of madness (not sanity!), develop inner eyes for seeing and apprehending unborn possibilities, cultivate the audacity to keep telling the emperor: 'Your Majesty, thou, indeed, are naked' (Osundare 2002:7).



The cruel feast  
of Kaya Maghan begins!



*Sia 3: Kerfa warns the young women of the impending sacrifice of a virgin for the Python god.*

*Sia 4: The announcement of the sacrifice by the hooded emissaries of the Python god.*



*Sia 5: Sia refuses to exchange the truth for status as queen.*



*Sia 6: Sia baffles the community when she chooses 'madness', rather than accept to be queen in a regime of liars.*

In joining forces with Mamadi to overthrow the state and take over power, Wakhane does no more than take personal revenge on the institution on whose behalf he sacrificed 'Little Mother'. His action, as a 'victim' of the system, does not do much to change the situation for the betterment of the entire community. In masterminding the creation of a new myth Wakhane emerges as deeply 'knotted' into this system that has made a victim of him as well (Johnson 2005). He is incapable of destroying it even if he knows about the evils within it. Instead, he helps sustain the lie which is its *raison d'être*. What appears to be a turning point

in terms of Wakhane's emotional outburst and the breaking of silence about the state's unfairness to him, a faithful servant, does not liberate society from the oppressive power of myth. He is to his core a calculating, selfish man, who takes advantage of the situation for his own, egocentric interests. When he confesses to Mamadi, in a tremulous voice, how he is still haunted by his insensitivity towards 'Little Mother', his pretty daughter, whom he 'nobly' consented to be sacrificed to the Python god in exchange for the high rank he now holds in the army, the viewer thinks he is finally regaining his humanity and beginning to act morally. Throughout the film, Wakhane is associated with living his traditional masculinity as the commander-in-chief of the army. However, of all the sacrifices he has made, the most unforgettable was his beloved daughter. He was deeply distressed by this, but in the name of manliness, he had to continue playing tough. He tried to live as a 'pure man', denying the traces of femininity in himself. This struggle to live the 'manhood script' that socialisation demands, comes at a cost for the man, since the idea of the 'making of him' or 'crafting of him' into masculinity implies some degree of going against the current to cover what may come more naturally to him (Vaughan 2002). The binary oppositional system of socialisation that emphasises psychological differences between men and women makes Wakhane deny a significant aspect of his humanity and live a lie. At this point he fails to suppress the softer side of his nature which is a mixture of the feminine and the masculine (Agacinski 1998). Now we see Wakhane, the perpetuator of the patriarchal script, built on traditional masculinity, as much a victim as the young virgins that have died in the scam of 'the Python god'. As he now plans to take revenge, he explains to Mamadi the haunting story of the death of his daughter, significantly called 'Little Mother':



- Wakhane: At 16, they delivered her up to the Python. I will never forget the look on her face that day. Her distraught antelope eyes, begging [his voice trembles with emotions that he tries to keep under control].
- Mamadi: [Moved to pity, gently pats him on the shoulder] My poor uncle...
- Wakhane: Let me speak! [He stops him and moves away] There is time for everything. Do not console me; I am not to be pitied. I am an unworthy father [his voice breaks again]. You know what 'Little Mother' said to me on the day of the sacrifice? Do you know? [Mamadi listens empathically] She said: 'Father! You always told me that death was invisible. I am not afraid of death. It is the serpent that I fear... I beg you father, blindfold me, I don't want to see the python! Do you know what I did that day? Do you know? I refused! I closed my eyes so not to see her tremble... I sinned out of sheer pride. I didn't want that a girl of my flesh and blood tremble before death.
- Mamadi: Uncle, for 'Little Mother' and for Sia, we must kill this monster.
- Wakhane: Kaya Maghan named me head of the army to console me for her loss. But it is impossible to forget. My only reason to live is to take revenge upon myself. Mamadi, listen well, what I am about to tell you is capital. Tomorrow, I will make you Kaya Maghan.

Virility is the battle cry of masculinity and it goes hand-in-hand with violence (Wesley 1999). This is well-reflected in the psychological state of Wakhane. What drives him is the desire to prove that he is not a weakling of a man, even if it means committing violence against his own beloved daughter. This kind of masculinity is, of course, rewarded and celebrated as 'nobility' though it greatly reduces the humanity of the person concerned.<sup>7</sup>

Wakhane has been a victim of a system built on lies and now he helps to set

up another built on a new set of lies to keep power secretive and mysterious. He is the master manipulator, exploiting the gullibility of the people. When the army massacres Kaya Maghan, he announces that power in the new regime belongs to the people, yet he is totally insensitive to Sia's trauma as one who was raped by the priests of the Python god – the same experience his 'Little Mother' had gone through. He now wants Sia to be silent and to celebrate the lie of Mamadi's 'heroism' – which she just cannot do. Here crude, insensitive power and patriarchy (masculinity) have the same face. Wakhane now menacingly warns the uncooperative Sia, 'It is we who saved your life. We can reduce you to silence'. As part of the patriarchal system, he is incapable of learning from his experience. His action confirms Hierro's (1994:178) analysis of patriarchal logic that in its morality:

Abraham represents the order that commands even the sacrifice of his own son, Isaac. This figure symbolizes the priority of the public sphere, within religion or the state, over family ties of blood or affection between mother, father, daughter and son. Although the masculine function in procreation was not known until well after patriarchy had inserted itself in the world scene.

This is consistent with the way he has acted in both private and public spheres. Similarly Mamadi, in his ambition to take power, not only kills his mentor Wakhane, but is ready to move on without Sia if she cannot be supportive. He risked his life to challenge the 'Python god' – a foundational myth – to apparently liberate her and the community, but when he embraces the myth of power, he silences his conscience. He pleads with Sia to sacrifice herself further and not to wreck his hopes of becoming the next emperor and she his queen. Upon Sia's refusal to cooperate, the continuity of this myth is in trouble even if he assumes power.

The gender dynamics in this film shows that society is governed on the terms of patriarchy, as male identity and male-centredness makes power rests in the hands of a few men. The majority of the men may themselves be oppressed, as seen in the film. The inclusion of women into the leadership corps is not at all an important value to the system as they are already marginal members (Johnson 2005:15–18). The woman who may be accommodated in this 'male-stream' must be ready to sacrifice something of her core identity – in this case Sia's silence about her rape is demanded. Her refusal poses a challenge to the dominant masculinity. The director exposes this myth that not only diminishes the humanity of its advocates and practitioners, but also destroys the most beautiful in the community. The film has a Janus face, looking into the past to find the link between the past and the present and to challenge audiences to construct



a better future. The director shows that the disregard of the feminine principle in governance, as well as its marginalisation and subjection to oppressive social practices is a disadvantage to the community as a whole.

### Female excision and the myth for marriage suitability

In *Finzan*, Sissoko uses the story of Fili to advocate against the cultural practice of female excision, as I mentioned in Chapter 2. Fili, whose excised mother died giving birth to her, has grown up determined to evade ‘purification’ and to educate women about the health dangers of this practice. Growing up in the city convinced her that it was possible to avoid this practice. However, her father, who notices her rebellious tendencies, decides to send her to the village when he thinks she is getting too difficult to control in the city. In the village the women, especially, ignore her efforts to ‘educate’ them against the age-old tradition and they see her as a menace to community values. When the women report her to the council of elders (men), they order her enforced excision. By the time she is seized for the ritual cut, a handful of women have started responding to her appeal for resistance. Fili dies in the process of her excision, just before a group of vigilant women arrive to rescue her. In *Finzan* there is no strong forum for women to unite as a group (Hijab 1988:33). It is understandable that a founding myth of this nature cannot be easily challenged since it represents the community’s philosophy in authenticating gender identities. It is difficult for a female to see her identity outside this ritual (Nzegwu 2011:262). What is important is that consciousness among the women has started rising. The community, especially Fili’s family, has to deal with the pain of losing her. It is likely that the community will not be too hard on the next female who resists the ritual.

In Sembène’s *Moolaadé*, the deaths of the three young girls divide the community on the value of the ritual. The major conflicts in the film are around the intervention of Collé, the second and favourite of Ciré Bathilly’s three wives, who offers patronage for four rebellious children. Because Collé successfully negotiated with her husband not to have their daughter Amsatou cut, she now dares to publicly challenge the institutions of the community that provides for such an intervention. She takes advantage of the society’s inviolable right of asylum (*moolaadé*) for the weak in order to protect the girls. Through her mediation, two sacred values, namely the right to asylum for the weak and the mandate for female purification (*salinde*) through excision, come into conflict. In her conscience-based decision Collé is aware that the choice she has made to protect the children is contentious, especially as she does it in the absence of her husband who, religiously and traditionally, would have the ultimate authority in

such a case. The need to protect the children became imperative for her because up to now she has suffered the consequences of her excision and lives with the sadness of having lost two of her children at birth. Now her only surviving daughter, Amsatou, is the product of a caesarean section that has left an ugly scar on her stomach as a constant reminder. She experiences no sexual pleasure because the act is an ordeal in her state. For these reasons, she is ready to pay the price of offering asylum for the children.



*Moolaadé 1: Little girls seeking asylum with Collé.*



*Moolaadé 2: Religious men and traditional women discussing Collé's rebellion.*

In both *Finzan* and *Moolaadé*, the filmmakers show the double standard patriarchy sets in keeping women in their place. Both communities in which the films are set appear to be progressive and open to modern ideas; though their attitudes towards women's position remained trapped in tradition. In *Finzan*, Sissoko adds a sequence to highlight this double standard and the static position of women within patriarchy. While the community is united behind their chief to resist the dictatorial imposition of the military government, forcing households to contribute bags of grains to feed the army, such a unity between men and women in addressing issues relating to gender and women do not attract the cooperation of men. Even the chief belittles the women's complaints. This supports Gwendolyn Konie's comment that the women's struggle for equal rights in the domestic sphere 'is going to prove even more difficult than that of decolonisation because in essence, it is a struggle between husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother' (Konie in Boyce & Graves 1990:8), which takes time to mobilise 'external' support for. This presents a dilemma for African feminists: whether they should champion a feminist course or stand beside men in the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism. Often a purely feminist agenda is sacrificed in the interest of a joint fight against colonialism and dictatorship. Patriarchal society readily mobilises women's support for issues of class and race that affect both genders, but is reluctant to

address women-specific oppression in the community, as seen in the cases of both Fili and Nanyuma.

Sissoko plays with the contradictions reflected in ‘Westernised’ African men living in France who return home to take excised women for wives. Fili’s fiancé, referred to as a ‘white man’ because of his Western dress code, gives the air of being flexible as an educated man who intends to live in France after his marriage to Fili, yet he only wants to marry a woman who has undergone the purification ritual. He can only accept Fili who is ready to live with him in France as his ‘matrimonial wife’ on this condition. Although he prefers unexcised women in his extramarital sexual life, he cannot endure his colleagues laughing at him for marrying an ‘unpurified’ female. The contradiction demonstrated by this young man corresponds with the findings in Tsanga’s (2011) research on the dialogue between culture and sex among members of a community in Kenya. Her findings affirm the double standards males, especially the younger and educated ones, use in readily defending traditional cultures that give them privilege over women, whether these practices infringe women’s rights or not. The young men, more than the elderly ones, tend to manipulate and justify traditional cultures that privilege them even if they live in urban settings (Tsanga 2011:66).

In *Moolaadé*, Sembène makes Doucoure Ibrahima, the France-based son of the chief, return home at the peak of the purification season and he is flamboyantly welcomed home on the day the bodies of two girls who have committed suicide in protest of excision are discovered in the village well. His homecoming as an heir – representing the ‘continuity’ of traditional life – abounds with contradictions. The camera often isolates Ibrahima in close-ups as he ponders the familiar–strange cultural business around him. Unlike Fili’s fiancé in *Finzan*, he is ambivalent about his father’s decision to cancel his engagement to Amsatou on account of her being a *bilakoro* (a derogative term for women who have passed the age of excision and have not undergone the ritual). He respectfully, but vehemently, opposes his father’s decision to marry his 11-year-old cousin, Filly, who has already been ‘purified’. Sembène effectively uses Ibrahima to critically interrogate this cultural practice. The contradictions in the lives of these ‘modern’ African men are further revealed when Ibrahima comes to buy condoms at Mercenaire’s stall. It is clear their lifestyles are in many ways untraditional except when it comes to matrimony. Through the dialogues among Ibrahima, Mercenaire and the chief, Sembène shows that the value of education is to equip people with critical thinking. At the end of the film Ibrahima courageously crosses the line and takes his position besides the subversive Amsatou, who tells him, ‘I am and shall remain

a *bilakoro*'. When the chief breaks his umbrella while violently hitting his son for contradicting his dictates, Ibrahima politely tells his father that, regardless of his violence against him, 'the era of little tyrants' will soon be coming to an end. The portrayal of Ibrahima as an educated young man bypasses the stereotypical male who obsessively affirms traditional masculinity whenever it benefits him. The new masculine courage Ibrahima represents entails standing out, often alone, to contest practices that reduce human dignity. The soundtrack eulogises his bravery as he takes his position beside Amsatou. Ibrahima, the 'new' male, is portrayed as fascinated by the sharpness of mind demonstrated by Amsatou and the four little girls who sought asylum with Collé. The girls ask him intelligent questions about tradition and modernity in relation to the ritual. It is clear he prefers the company of insightful females to that of pretty Filly who follows orders without questioning. Ibrahima is a development of the confused educated man in *Finzan* who does not have the courage to contest cultural practices that are oppressive to women whose fates are, after all, tied to those of men. He is a blind follower of culture and Sissoko ridicules him.

Both Sembène and Sissoko deride the pretentious anxiety of traditional men about the 'taboo' of sexual contact with unexcised women. In *Moolaadé*, Sembène humorously makes the old men whisper a question among themselves to find out if any of them has ever lain with a *bilakoro*, something considered a taboo. Their nervous responses suggest it is blasphemy to even think of such a possibility in their opinion and yet the secrecy with which they ask the question of each other belies the possibility of their having slept with 'unpurified' females. Mercenaire's candid conversation with Ibrahima underscores the fact that the men sleep with unexcised women anyway; although the one suitable for marriage must be sapped of sexual pleasure to assuage their sense of insecurity. Similarly, in *Finzan* the 'explosive' news that Fili is about to get married and yet is not excised, shocks the community and spreads like wildfire. The issue is communicated as an emergency the community must address. In the all-male gathering of community members that discuss the young woman's sexuality, it is not only Fili who is ridiculed, but the young man who is about to marry her as well. The elders tease him on two levels – how does he know that she is not cut? Has she already incurred the shame of losing her virginity? Secondly, how could he think of marrying an unexcised Bambara woman, contrary to their cherished tradition? Religion, taboo and all that is sacred in the land work together to augment the man's sexual pleasure at the expense of the woman's tethered one (Friedan 2001:536).



This double standard is further shown in the manner in which men and women relate to ‘modernity’ and technology in *Moolaadé*. Mercenaire, the village trader, brings all sorts of modern things from the city that the community members need. All visit his stall to get what they need. Both men and women buy radio batteries to listen to their favourite programmes. The radio, particularly, has improved women’s knowledge about many things and has empowered them to assert themselves more positively. Collé, thanks to the radio, is able to confront the men about the fact that excision is not a requirement in Islam even if the men tell her it is. The radio helps the women dismantle the myths circulated about *bilakoro* women as undesirable and infertile. The desperate move to confiscate the women’s radios and to burn them in front of the mosque is a hysterical effort on the part of the men to keep the gates to the information women get closed. Women’s access to information scares the men because it displaces their role in controlling the flow of information and hence maintaining their hold on power. The radio is portrayed as a powerful catalyst for social change in the film. In real life, it has become part of the women’s company in rural Africa (Sanga 1996:108) and Collé is always associated with it in the film. Significantly, her radio escapes confiscation and destruction by the ‘religious’ men who condemn technology in the hands of women. In the final sequence, when all the radios of the women are in the flames, Collé emerges with her radio turned on for the entire group of women to listen to their favourite programme. The women’s boisterous laughter affirms that neither their minds nor the radio (media) and its influence can be controlled by oppressive regimes. Ironically, although the men deny women access to the media, they appreciate the value of the media for themselves. The television Ibrahimia brings home is looked at with even greater suspicion as a corrupting force, especially on women. The same men who praise Ibrahimia for bringing progress to their village refuse to accept the radio and television as a progressive force just because these media offer equal access to information for the genders. The woman who tries to shake off male patronage, especially with regard to access to information, is considered dangerous as this diminishes male control. Collé, in this regard, is seen as a woman whose husband has failed to control her.



*Moolaadé 3: A religious man heaps the women's radios to be burnt.*



*Moolaadé 4: Religious men's desperate attempt to destroy the women's radios.*



*Moolaadé 5: Collé's radio defiantly survives the men's flames.*

While a man's exposure to modernity is admired, this is not so for the woman. Ibrahima is admired by the community for having been to France. One of the village men looks up to him as a role model for his son. France is where he desires his own son to go when he comes of age. France, the place associated with modernity, is where boys can aspire to go for advancement. Girls, on the contrary, are expected to be content with the village and the traditional way of life. It is here that boys return to marry traditional women as wives. What Friedan (2001:78) says of the American society, which values a man's growth and development through his excursions to the outside world, resonates with the situation represented in these films. The man who has been to Europe is considered heroic and more influential in these films. This is seen in the reception given to Ibrahima in *Moolaadé*. Sembène ironically represents the paradox of the community's desire for modern things, while rejecting the exposure of women to the same modernity. The communities that appear flexible and open to new ideas remain rigid in matters relating to the position of women.



## From individual to community protest

In *Moolaadé*, women and men are contrasted in the mise-en-scène. Women dominate, both in terms of their physical presence and the roles they play in the film. They drive the actions in the film, just as they do life in the community. Their presence and contributions are evident in mundane activities, as the opening sequence of the film makes clear. Sembène plays with the irony of the dominance of their physical presence and their absence in decision-making, even in matters that affect their health and wellbeing. The entire narrative is punctuated by women's daily activities such as drawing water, grinding grain, cooking food, nursing babies and managing the home since the men are often absent from home. This material role is juxtaposed with the men's religious and political functions. To emphasise this, Sembène often cross-cuts scenes of women engaged in physical work with men going to the mosque, giving religious instructions to the young and adjudicating in community conflicts. These are all functions they perform seated. While the women are associated with the material aspects of life, the men are associated with ideological and spiritual control. When the conflict between Collé and the *salindana* (female ritual elders) reaches its peak, it is the council of elders, all men, who claim to have the knowledge and wisdom to unravel the conflict between the sacred traditions of *moolaadé* (right of asylum) and *salinde* (purification). The men carry an air of being associated with the sacred and the mystical, both in traditional and Islamic religions. However, in the portrayal of Collé, Sembène undermines the myth of male prerogative over sacred codes (Johnson 2005:8).

Both Sembène and Sissoko draw attention to the often-unacknowledged role of women as domestic workers. In the opening sequence of *Finzan*, what strikes one is the silence in which women are enshrouded, from the moment they wake up at dawn to begin their domestic chores. Close-ups of women's hard, sad and apathetic faces dominate. They wake at dawn when the rest of the family are still asleep. The family joins the woman in the field to clear the bushes, after she has fed the family. Sissoko presents an ideological montage paralleling women with domestic animals like goats, camels and pigs. He shows close-up sequences of pegged-down goats and pigs suckling their young as the women go about their morning chores to feed their families. In the film this works as a prelude to how women are metaphorically pegged to tradition. Later in the film, Nanyuma is tied by ropes and forced to submit to the dictates of tradition. This scene is intercut with a shot of a goat tied to a pole, which communicates the similarity between the two. Correspondingly, the opening sequence of *Moolaadé*

draws attention to the details of the domestic responsibilities of women that are often unacknowledged. The silence in the opening sequence is broken by the commanding voices and shouts of men. This immediately establishes the power dynamics within the society. Women are characterised by silence, while men possess the power of speech. Women in both films gradually move from silence to speaking out.

*Moolaadé* is a film that goes beyond exposing the problem to mobilising community resistance to female excision. From a single woman's courageous decision, the women in the community lead a demonstration against the ritual. In the end the *salindana* who are set to crush Collé's subversion give up their knives to be burned in the same fire that was set to destroy the women's radios. The battle between the women and the men is more than a draw: the men have destroyed a handful of their radios but the women have destroyed the oppressive symbol of their 'purification'. Ciré, who had flogged Collé in public to demonstrate his authority as a husband and to demand her giving up her patronage of the children, finally makes a courageous decision to join the women in their protest against the ritual. In the narrative resolution Collé wins the battle and the entire community of women echo her victory by chanting: 'No girl will ever be cut again!'



*Moolaadé 6: The women's pledge to stop FGM and consecrate the female child.*



*Moolaadé 7: Collé and the women cannot be subdued.*

A peripheral character associated with both Collé and Mercenaire is the subversive Sanata, the griot. While both the elders and *salindana* refer to Collé as 'crazy', 'subversive' and 'Satan herself', Sanata, who performs eulogies for her, calls Collé, a woman 'more valiant than men'. Because of her association with Mercenaire, Sanata is seen as depraved and the official griot considers her to be a competitor. The fact that she belongs to a lower social class does not subdue her in the presence of the elders and dignitaries in the community.



Consistent with his style of bringing the official and the unofficial into conflict with one another, Sembène uses minor characters and people mainstream society considers to be of no consequence to make significant points and to function as redemptive characters. The women whose radios are confiscated ask the provocative question, ‘The men want to lock women’s minds, but how can a woman’s mind be locked since it is invisible?’ This rhetorical question from these simple women indicates the level of their consciousness. It is as high as that of Western-educated Ibrahima, who tries to educate the elders that today the media has become so much part of everyday life that it cannot be silenced. Collé, who now uses the radio as her source of information, can tell the women what the Grand Imam said about purification not being a requirement in Islam and that some of the millions of women who go on pilgrimage to Mecca annually are not cut. She realises that the correct information gives one agency. With the women’s ideological liberation, the men’s control of their sexuality is slipping away and this is a threat to the status quo. Just as the Grand Imam informs his listeners, recent ethnographic research by Ellen Gruenbaum affirms that there are

better prospects for discouraging the practice in ongoing, low-key efforts of some Islamic leaders to spread the word that female circumcision, at least the most extreme variation, is a pre-Islamic practice, not a religious mandate (Library of Congress Report 2005:70).

If Islamic religious leaders become more involved in dissociating this cultural practice from the core values of Islam, one can envision its end in the not-so-distant a future. The use of religion in endorsing this practice is what patriarchy in Islamic countries hold onto.

When Collé endures the whip without succumbing to the will of patriarchy, she demonstrates that she too has the right to interpret and apply sacred and traditional codes to the advantage of the vulnerable. Her failure to be subjugated through the whip is a decisive challenge to a constructed myth, rampant in many African traditional cultures that a stubborn wife learns to obey through the whip (Kiyimba 2010:42). When the whip fails to subdue a woman, as in the case of Collé, dominant masculinity is enveloped by fear and hysteria. Collé’s resistance is a metaphoric defeat of patriarchy’s attempts to have complete control over women. The next day, when Ciré goes to the mosque, he passes by and humbly greets a group of women gathered in his home to celebrate Collé’s victory. Khardjatou, his senior wife, responds to his greeting with, ‘Pray for us’, which in this circumstance sounds more like a challenge from the triumphant

women than a genuine request for a prayer. Sembène's film, in its radicalness, develops the women's challenge and reverses Fili's death in *Finzan*. Up to the time of her excision, the women as a group are divided on whether to support Fili or not, for she appears out of place in her rebellion. Even Nanyuma, who appears to be sympathetic, reminds her of the importance of the ritual for the wellbeing of women and the community at large. The fictional reality in the film corresponds with actual practices, as confirmed by a human rights report on traditional practices that are harmful for women. I quote at length the traditional belief system of the Bambara and the Dogon, which is fairly representative of the communities that perpetuate the practice to date:

This practice is so deeply rooted in tradition and culture that any challenge to it runs into strong social opposition and repercussions. Women who have not been subjected to one of the procedures or parents who refuse to subject their daughters to it face social pressures and potential ostracism from society. Often women who have not undergone the procedure cannot marry. Malian society considers an individual (male or female) to be a child until circumcised.

Some Bambara and Dogon believe that if the clitoris comes in contact with the baby's head during birth, the child will die. It is their deeply held belief that both the female and the male sex exist within each person at birth and it is necessary to rid the female body of vestiges of maleness to overcome any sexual ambiguity. The clitoris represents the male element in a young girl while the foreskin represents the female element in a young boy. Both must be removed to clearly demarcate the sex of the person.

Another extreme belief of the Bambara men is that upon entering an unexcised woman, a man could be killed by the secretion of a poison from the clitoris upon its contact with the penis. This folk belief acts as a rationale for clitoral excision (US Department of State 2001:45)

In societies where a woman's worth rests on motherhood, it is an unthinkable taboo for any decent woman to resist this practice as it is regarded as a mark of her authenticity as a suitable and responsible woman and ensures the continuity of the community (Nzegwu 2011:262).

In *Moolaadé*, the growing awareness of the women to resist oppression matches Sembène's earlier female portrayals in films like *Emitai* and *Ceddo*. Collé first wins the support of her indomitable senior co-wife, Khardjatou, who supports her, putting aside the fact that she is a rival as a co-wife. Once a bond has been established between them over the need to protect the children, Khardjatou confides in Collé that she, too, hates the purification ritual though she did not have the courage to stop her daughters from going through it. With her support



as senior wife, it becomes easier for the rest of the women to join Collé. This leads to the final thunderous pronouncement of the symbolic ‘death sentence’ on the ritual. The courage of single individuals leads to an irrevocable challenge to the status quo. Khardjatou is also portrayed as a strong woman who knows when to assent to her husband’s authority and when to negate it. This affirms Nabasuta’s argument that the ‘traditional woman is not always as compliant or acquiescent as the guardians of masculinity would like to believe’ (Mugambi 2010:85). In both *Finzan* and *Moolaadé*, the directors represent the excision ritual as despicable. The brute force used to cut Fili and the little girls border on the barbaric. The viewer sees a close-up of the surgeon’s hands with the razor blade at the ready and hears horrifying cries as the operation is carried out. If the director appears to represent this sequence ‘in an impassioned, reductionist and/or ethnographic mode to represent the people who practice it as backward, misogynistic and generally lacking in humane and compassionate inclination’ (Lionnet 1991:2), it is because he does not see justification for it. That Fili – full of life – dies at the end of the film makes the appeal for revolt even stronger. It is for such an explicit exposition of women’s condition that *Finzan* is considered a strongly feminist film (Petty 1996:191).

## Women in polygamy

Although polygamy is considered a given in African societies, the films analysed in this book show that monogamous marriages are actually the norm. Where polygamy features, especially in Islamic contexts, it is portrayed as a problem to family harmony. This is a consistent reflection in Sembène’s *Xala*, *Guelwaar* and *Moolaadé*. In *Xala*, the director uses the three wives of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye to reflect the leadership bankruptcy of the post-independent African elite. Commenting on these marriages, Sembène (in Ghali 1987:45) informs:

He got his first wife before becoming a somebody. Along with his economic and social development, he takes a second who corresponds, so to speak, to a second historical phase. The third, his daughter’s age but without her mind, is only there for his self-esteem. She is submissive (unlike his daughter)... she is of the ‘Be beautiful and shut up’, variety.

The first wife, who appears to have married for love is idealised by the director. She alone stays with El Hadji in his good and bad times. The second wife is the materialist, who married in good economic times and leaves her husband with whatever property she can carry away as soon as his financial situation deteriorates. The third wife, the young, beautiful and silent Ngone whose



marriage cannot be consummated because of the *xala* that struck El Hadji on the nuptial night, not only represents a woman as an object to boost an old man's ego, but also expresses Sembène's disgust at the failure of African leaders to consider their priorities right. When El Hadji becomes financially insufficient, Ngone's aunt, who throughout the film speaks and acts on her behalf, ends the affair (MacRae 1999:241–254). Ngone, as a metaphor for pleasure, remains a gorgeous but elusive object of desire. She represents how women in modern city contexts may surrender their independence in exchange for material gain. Ngone is framed with a naked and erotic photograph of herself on the wall of her bedroom to emphasise her location as a 'pleasure object'. Her value as a sex symbol is underlined by the aunt's comment, that 'a girl like that could arouse a dead man'. The satirical portrayal of the troubles of El Hadji and the resources he wastes to unsuccessfully find a cure for his *xala*, ultimately brings him to two essential prerogatives: to return to his faithful first wife and reacknowledge his brotherhood with the poor. In a way, El Hadji's 'misuse' of women for selfish ends and his disregard of the poor have led to his ruin.

The kind of competition and rivalry, covert and overt, among the women breeds conflict and makes familial relationships unpleasant. El Hadji is not in control of the situation. Oumi, his jealous second wife, treats him with utter disrespect at a time he needs understanding. None of the wives enjoy being in a polygamous marriage. Not even Adja, the traditional first wife, can pretend to be happy about the situation; the only difference is that she does not talk about it. Her stoic accommodation of her co-wives conceals deep pain. The power politics among the wives for recognition and self-importance makes the women incapable of showing solidarity for a common purpose. Adja's prerogative as the first wife is to demand respect from the second wife as tradition and religion allow her and this is resented by the co-wife. In exposing the woes of polygamy for both men and women, Sembène's position is similar to that of the Senegalese feminist writer, Mariama Bâ, in *So Long a Letter* (1989) where one of her protagonists rejects polygamy as a violation of what marriage is meant to be. The Holy Qur'an has been careful in its wording even where it appears to grant men permission to marry up to four women, the advice in the same verse is that one is best (Sura 4:3).

Sembène develops this unproductive competition among co-wives further in *Moolaadé*. Amath, Ciré's elder brother, persuades Ciré to take a third, younger and humbler wife, Alima, as a way of subduing Collé, who has proven to be independent-minded. He deliberately marries Alima to heighten competition and rivalry among the women as a form of subjugation. The position of 'favourite'



wife keeps shifting as soon as a new woman joins the family. This rivalry is noticeable even in the relationship between Khardjatou and Collé, although the two have won each other's confidence about the children's protection. Alima, the youngest wife, remains aloof and difficult to bring into the circle of solidarity. As a newcomer, she still has to prove herself and win her husband's favour through her submissiveness. The director's purpose in this film is also to appeal to women that the struggle against female excision requires their unity. Alima ultimately joins the rest of the women in resolutely encouraging Collé not to give in to their husband, even though he is whipping her, which is meant to break her will so that she will follow tradition. When Collé succeeds in enduring the whip without pronouncing the sacred word, her victory is for all the women. With Ciré, their husband, and Ibrahima, the future chief, on their side, there is nothing to stop the women from daring the status quo further. The victimisation of Mercenaire, leading to his death for 'stopping a husband from beating his wife' and the verbal threats that the men will never marry *bilakoro* in spite of the women's protests, all sound hollow.

In comparison to *Xala*, though the power politics among the co-wives in *Moolaadé* is still evident, it is well-moderated and does not divert their attention from the central conflict in the film. Each woman knows her place in this patriarchal order. The senior wife, the principal deputy of the husband, takes her position seriously and keeps the rest of the women in their respective places. There are several sequences where Sembène refers to this hierarchy of authority. Khardjatou is the reference point in the absence of their husband. She is aware of and enjoys the authority she wields over the junior wives. When their husband talks to all of them together, as when Ciré reprimands them for giving asylum to the fugitive children, the senior wife is the one addressed and she responds on behalf of all. When Collé cannot provide the money Amsatou needs to buy the necessary personal effects she needs to welcome her fiancé from Paris, she goes to her senior mother, who provides a solution in the absence of their husband. She is the one who nurses Collé's wounds after her night of ordeal in her husband's bed and the public flogging in the village square. In the sequence where their husband uses sex and a public flogging as forms of subjugation through which Collé is wounded in private and in public, Khardjatou demonstrates sympathy and solidarity with her co-wife. Sembène effectively uses parallel editing to establish the link between excision in childhood and the woman's sacrifice of sexual pleasure throughout her life. The *salindana*'s painful operation on a struggling child is inter-cut with the scene of Ciré making painful love to Collé, who bites her finger in agony. She is

wounded just like the little girl pinned down by the *salindana*. The close-ups of the two faces – Collé’s and the child’s – underline the connection between the two. She and her husband do not share the same pleasure. As Friedan (2001:81) would put it, ‘He took his pleasure with her’ but she was not part of it.

There are instances when Collé and Khardjatou engage in friendly dialogue. The first time is when Khardjatou asks whether she knows the implication of the *moolaadé* (asylum) she has started. When she notes Collé’s resolve to go through with the process, she decides to support her openly. When Collé confides in her that their husband wants her to utter the redemptive word to ward off the *moolaadé* spell, Khardjatou is the first to tell her not to utter the word for it is dangerous to end the protection once invoked. She informs her of how two women died as a result of revoking the vindictive spirit of *moolaadé*. This information shows that women, as vulnerable members in patriarchal society, often try to use the available structures to resist oppression. Khardjatou often covers for Collé and takes her part. For instance, she ignores her son’s insistence that as the eldest mother she should intervene to stop Collé from giving protection to the girls.

In spite of the confidences shared between them, Khardjatou on a number of occasions puts Collé in her place when she tries to cross the line with her. She sternly orders Collé, with whom she has just had a friendly conversation: ‘Don’t raise your voice when talking to me! Go back to your quarters!’ A shot of Collé moving away subdued is cross-cut with the senior wife relishing the effect of her power over ‘mad’ Collé, who listens to her after all. In the same way, when Alima expresses fears that Collé’s confrontation with the *salindana* will bring down a curse on the children, Collé silences her with, ‘The girls are not in your care!’ When Alima responds with a jeer, Collé threatens to kick her, but Khardjatou is quick to come between them saying, ‘Don’t touch her, she has my protection’. Collé goes away cowed, leaving the senior wife gleefully commenting, ‘You are not crazy after all. She still has respect for me’. Khardjatou exercises the same authority over Alima, who as the youngest member evidently has little influence in the family. Their little power plays notwithstanding, a strong sense of solidarity exists among the wives, especially in standing by Collé at the crucial moment of her flogging by their husband. As the co-wives nurse Collé’s wounds, Khardjatou regrets having had her daughters cut and Alima herself sincerely confesses that she felt Collé’s pain in her own flesh as the lashes tore her skin.



## Polygamous men's 'fatal' attraction to young, sophisticated women

In *Guelwaar*, Aminta and Oumy, the first and second wives of the deceased Meyssa Ciss, represent a different dimension of women in Islamic polygamous marriages. Like Nanyuma in *Finzan*, Oumy protests her being confined to the home of their deceased husband, aware that it will lead to her being inherited as Mor Ciss's fourth wife. He is the younger brother of her late husband who was old enough to be Oumy's grandfather. Sembène uses both Aminta and Oumy to expose the hypocrisy of fanatical adherents of Islam. Although the two co-wives have different views on remaining in their mourning attire, as Islam demands, they agree on hiding the condolence money brought by visitors who come to commiserate with them. Aminta, as the first wife, does not openly complain about her situation and she treats Oumy as a younger sister, advising her to be patient and not be in a rush to leave their deceased husband's home.

Oumy, who is simply acting out 'being in mourning', is already tired of going through the traditional four months and ten days of grieving a widow must go through. The quarrel between her and Mor Ciss, who wants to inherit her, reveals a number of contradictions in her marriage to the Ciss family. She decides to renounce her marriage and return to her father's home alone, without her children, because she wants to be free. After all, in Islam, the children belong to their father, she argues. She exposes her youthful arms to Mor Ciss as a demonstration that she is young enough to begin a 'new' life, away from the Ciss family. Oumy's response to her situation shows the multiplicity of 'woman' that cannot be reduced to stereotypes (Marima 2011). Oumy wants her 'independence' after the death of her grandfatherly husband, which she experiences as a relief instead of a cause for mourning. The beauty magazine that she keeps hidden in the folds of her mourning gown, and which she flips through whenever she is alone with Aminta, is what she goes away with, not her children who still need her care. This mother is totally different from the idealised image of motherhood in African artistic representations. It makes her exit from the narrative an open text that generates several meanings. She reminisces about the exit of the woman in *Borom Sarret* who hands the child to her husband to go earn a living for the family herself. While all three women – Oumy in *Guelwaar*, Oumi in *Xala* and Collé in *Moolaadé* – are associated with the influence of the media, they all use it differently. Oumy's beauty magazine full of young and pretty women makes her fantasise about a life of glamour. For Oumi, the television is the medium that connects her to the outer world, especially the West. Among the goods she takes with her as she leaves

her bankrupt husband, it is the television set in particular that she treats with great care. Collé's use of the radio indicates more progress: to sort truth from untruth and to gain agency in directing herself and her social class.

Sembène uses Oumy to denounce the hypocrisy surrounding her marriage to Meyssa Ciss. That she and Mor Ciss have been 'going to the bushes together' while her late husband was still alive is something abominable in Islam. Yet Mor Ciss uses quotes from Islamic laws to defend his rights to Oumy because tradition allows one to generate children on behalf of an impotent brother. After all, the children generated belong to the larger family. In this confusing situation it becomes hard to say who Oumy's real husband is, Mor or Meyssa? This undesirable situation is intensified by the obvious age difference between Mor and Oumy. Oumy wants to get out of this confusion. She realises that the beautiful qualities expected from the ideal woman in Islam cover a multitude of vices on the part of men. Islam allows men many rights and privileges as a result of their 'indisputable superiority' over women, enshrined in the Qur'anic verse:

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their money for maintaining them [the women]. The righteous women are devotedly obedient and they guard, in their husband's absence, what Allah would have them guard (Qur'an 3:44).

There can be no argument about such a law as it is reinforced by religion and daily living. This makes Oumy's disobedience in discarding her mourning dress prematurely quite audacious. In this respect her behaviour falls short of the expectations of the ideal woman in Islam (Al-Hashimi 1998). What is more, she does not seem bothered by this as she walks out of her husband's home. Mor Ciss's threat that he will report her to her father who would intervene in his favour cannot stop her.

In *Finyé*, Boughedir identifies three concrete levels of Africa existing in the film: the traditional, the contemporary and the future Africa – made up of youth searching for better leadership and a better lifestyle. As noted by Diawara, the fourth emerging Africa, Boughedir suggests, is one that is characterised by the prominence of women. He describes the representation of the women as:

a class apart, submitting in principle to the male order, but who succeed in acquiring their autonomy in spite of that domination... or who make use of that domination as do Governor Sangaré's wives, in particular the youngest (Boughedir 1992:85).

In the film, polygamy is portrayed as Governor Sangaré's unquestioned right, while it is the responsibility of the women to keep harmony in the family. The



wives of Sangaré represent interesting slants of resistance to his dictatorial rule in the home. For instance, whenever Sangaré returns home from work, he obviously expects the women to come and welcome him one by one in the order of seniority – from the first to the last wife. However, the manner in which the women carry out this exercise shows they are simply performing a formality, without love. The third wife, Agna, is the most overtly rebellious. She is a ‘modern’ woman and does not have a child. This fact does not bother her in a society where a woman’s worth is thought to reside in her motherhood. She is contrasted with her co-wives who are mothers and are in different stages of pregnancy. In negotiating with her husband as to her terms, Agna can afford to tell him, ‘If you are thinking of taking a fourth wife, I will go home’. Despite her childlessness and the trouble she gives her husband, she is still the favourite wife. She monitors her husband’s movements as much as he does hers. This is something none of the senior wives can do. Agna is unemployed like her co-wives and is therefore totally financially dependent on her husband. She carries herself as the youngest and troublesome ‘trophy’ of Sangaré. Most of her time is spent on beautifying her nails and face. Aware of her privileged position as the youngest wife, she refuses to perform the obligatory ritual of greeting which the rest of the women are forced to do. She demands, instead, that her husband comes to greet her in her room.

The shots in sequences relating to Sangaré’s relationship with his wives are framed in ways that subvert the power relationship between him and them. His power appears diminished before the women who are empowered by the low camera angle. The most revealing sequence is when the first wife and Agna stage a mock quarrel to divert their husband’s anger from Batrou, who has been visiting Ba against her father’s orders. Sangaré is comfortably reclined on a cushion and Agna is stationed at his feet, massaging him. He is obliviously enjoying the massage while a close-up of Agna’s face shows a lack of affection. This establishes to the viewer the discordance between them. Agna gives him a false smile whenever Sangaré throws a cursory glance at her. An ironic reverse close-up of Sangaré’s face shows him relaxed, believing that he is in control of the woman kneeling at his feet in this posture of submission (Lehmann 2009:134–150). Then the first wife dramatically joins them when Sangaré calls her to explain where Batrou is. A close-up of her face reveals her intention to pick a deliberate quarrel with Agna. In her standing position, the camera angle gives her authority over Sangaré, who is reclining on a cushion. When she responds to her husband’s question, Agna deliberately contradicts her and a quarrel begins between the two. Instead of focusing on Batrou, the two women

insult each other in their husband's presence. Sangaré is forced to intervene by 'authoritatively' dismissing both from his presence. The women leave their husband's presence still quarrelling and accusing each other of breaking the family peace. The quarrel comes to an abrupt end as soon as they are out of their husband's earshot. Once the women are alone, they converse civilly among themselves. In fact, they talk about Sangaré's selfishness and undesirable authoritarianism. This sequence is complex. At one level, it represents the women's efforts to subvert the authority of their husband and create their own space within the paranoid control of the governor. This is a game Batrou and Agna keep playing against Sangaré at several points in the film. This time, the women mimic and act out patriarchy's framing of them as a querulous lot and the man as one who intervenes to restore harmony with his authority. Bhabha's (1994) reflections in 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' helps to explain the situation of the women 'colonised' and treated as 'other' in the context of patriarchal hegemony where they employ mimicry as camouflage to resist Sangaré's attempted control over them. The relationships among them show power as ambivalent, characterised by partial control and slippages that make the efforts of any one group to dominate the other as always incomplete – almost, but not quite (Bhabha 1994:85–92). Sangaré's attempt at complete control is ridiculed by his wives' complicity to evade and make fun of it.

Cissé represents the internal contradictions within this polygamous family where the youngest wife can be taken for Sangaré's daughter. He frames Agna, Batrou and Sangaré together to emphasise the age difference between the husband and his wives and the trouble implied in this. Agna, young enough to be Sangaré's daughter, struggles to win the attention of Ba, Batrou's boyfriend. Her search for lovers among schoolboys and younger men shows her overall, including sexual, dissatisfaction with her marriage to Sangaré. It is the economic benefits that make her stay in it, though she constantly breaks society's codes of conduct in the process. She loathes her husband's authority and deliberately provokes him and his co-wives by smoking in public, drinking whisky in the house and dressing extravagantly to catch the attention of other male admirers. She is portrayed as a woman who is actively involved in searching for (sexual) pleasure (Nzegwu 2011). Her co-wives consider her a just chastisement for Sangaré's arrogance and authoritarianism.

Among the women, it is Agna who can stand up to her husband. When Batrou is arrested together with the students, she drives up to Sangaré's office to demand his intervention to secure Batrou's release, even if only for the sake



of public opinion. She dares him to exercise power with restraint. The fact that Sangaré finds desirable, as a third wife, a young woman popularly referred to as a whore, is intriguing. In her presence, he loses his dominance. Towards the end of the film Cissé introduces a fourth woman (a mistress) with whom Sangaré has a business deal. This woman who is seen only once is even more debonair than Agna in getting what she wants:

Woman: [On arrival] I'm tired. Have you been here long?

Sangaré: [Getting up from the hammock] Yes, I have. You are late. It's almost evening. [He says this without anger].

Woman: Sorry. It wasn't easy to get the money. I sold your land and the milk. I had to walk miles to get here. [Close-up of her face shows she is experienced in this game of deceit].

Sangaré: [Looking straight at her] How much did you get?

Woman: Five hundred thousand francs. It's in the car. I don't want to bring you cash here anymore. Give me your account number. I'll put it in the bank.

Sangaré: [Only his voice is heard] You're crazy. If I put it in the bank everyone will know about it.

In their secret rendezvous, the governor expects her to bring, in cash, all the money from their business deals. In the first place, the woman arrives late for the appointment and does not even apologise. Their interesting dialogue shows her to be suave and in control of the situation. In this relationship, she is trying to carve herself a space as Sangaré's reliable financial administrator and her cool manner convinces him. The camera angle that frames the two in conversation makes the standing woman dominant over Sangaré, who is seated in a hammock. This reinforces the subtle power shift in this well-managed and clever dialogue between the two. As he is inevitably attracted to younger and sophisticated women, Sangaré's autocracy is bound to be diminished.

Cissé's women are dynamic in various ways, as seen in the wives of Sangaré who are shrewdly assertive. They speak to him standing, different from the usual kneeling posture traditional women adopt when speaking to their husbands.

Where need be, they are complicit in scheming to frustrate their husband's control. Through them, the film questions the value of polygamy, which men have accepted as their right and embraced without even critically probing its usefulness for themselves. Sangaré's vigilance to control his wives and crush the students' demonstrations both fail. His exaggerated show of power when he attempts to shoot Agna for answering him back is ridiculed as much as his efforts to imprison Ba for life and distract Batrou, his daughter, with a scholarship to France. The schemes of the wives to evade his control ridicule polygamy as an institution of male power over women (Diawara 1996:212).

What stands out about these married women, including the modern and sophisticated-looking ones like Agna, is that they are not gainfully employed. They are totally dependent on their husband as the provider of their material comforts. The economic dependence of women on their husbands is a critique repeatedly launched by filmmakers like Sembène in several of his films. He sees the problem of polygamy as linked to the inferiority of women's social status and heightened by their economic dependence on men. The way out of this syndrome is social change that will lead to the economic empowerment of women and so improve their lives as a group (Murphy 2000:126). Women's bargaining power for gender equality improves with their economic independence. The major obstacle, Sembène argues, is men's refusal to give up their privileges and to allow for a more dynamic relationship between the genders (Murphy 2000: 138).

## Women under new economic challenges

Although a film like Sembène's *Faat Kiné* celebrates the achievements of a single mother who emerges out of a series of predatory relationships with men to become an entrepreneur capable of giving her two children a university education and later marrying a man of her choice for love, the stories of women I discuss in Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* and Sembène's *Guelwaar* represent different dimensions of women's experiences in the city. In my analysis, I will highlight the relation between women's experiences in urban environments and in more traditional settings in order to appreciate gender dynamics. *Madame Brouette* and *Guelwaar* portray facets of the hardships of survival in African cities. The tone of both films captures the directors' empathy with women who often bear the full responsibility of providing food and sustenance for their families under difficult circumstances.



To begin with, *Madame Brouette* is an empathising ode to a beautiful African woman with a strong desire for love, living in a challenging postcolonial city. The narrative moves from a celebratory mood dominated by women in colourful party dresses that express their happiness and exuberance for life, to a gradual destruction of this zest for life, as the protagonists become progressively entangled in discontented relationships with men. In this story, which mainly unfolds through flashbacks, the contrast between the beginning and the end of the film is remarkable in terms of the setting, the colours and the moods of the characters involved. The viewer is presented with stories of women whose marriages cannot be sustained for various reasons. Ndaxte, a friend of Mati (*Madame Brouette*), is a young mother with four children who is perpetually battered by her ill-tempered husband. She decides to leave Biraan, her husband, when she cannot take his beatings anymore. Apparently, the reason for Biraan's irritability is the difficult economic situation that makes it hard for an unemployed man like him to play his role as the breadwinner in the family (Petty 2009:106–107). In his financial insecurity, all he can say about women is, 'When you have money, they are like flies! When you lose your job, they make your life hell!' When he throws Ndaxte out of his home for no good reason, Mati takes her in and the two women's ingenious struggles to make a decent living for themselves deconstruct Biraan's statement that women sponge on men. In the relationship between Ndaxte and Biraan, the filmmaker subtly introduces the breadwinner debate in traditional Islamic African homesteads. The man, the supposed traditional breadwinner, is becoming progressively disempowered in this new setting as women are increasingly stepping into the position of being the breadwinner. This is a challenging shift for both genders in a society where women's:

lower participation in the economy, along with lower participation in the political sphere, is one of the few major dimensions in which women's lives... remain statistically distinctive compared to those of women elsewhere (Congress of Library Report 2005:73).

The traditional trend in many Islamic countries favours the reality of the man as the breadwinner and not vice versa. The inversion the filmmaker has made here can be unsettling for a man like Biraan who wants to assert hegemonic masculinity. The connection between economics and politics is evident in the quote.

Both Mati and Ndaxte are unconventional women who have abandoned their abusive marriages, a situation that makes it hard for them to gain the

community's respect. Being a divorcee or a single mother are conditions traditional society frowns upon (Wachenge 1994; Ethridge 2003). As married women, they have already lost their residencies in their fathers' homes where, according to tradition, they can only be received back as temporary visitors. After the failure of her first marriage, Mati is thus temporarily accommodated in her father's home. She challenges traditional codes when she offers Ndaxte accommodation in her father's house, where she herself is now considered a visitor. What makes it easier for Mati's father to accept the two women into his house is the financial support they offer to relieve the burden of the official breadwinner in the family. It is for this that Mati's father, a respected religious man, can risk the dishonour of keeping these married 'returnees' in his family.

When Biraan comes to plead for the return of Ndaxte, because he cannot manage the family without her priceless contributions, the traditional requirement is that she has to oblige for the sake of the children. This is what often diminishes women's bargaining power in quitting an abusive relationship (Iversen & Rosenbluth 2006). Love between the two, in this case, is out of the question; it is the woman's role as caretaker of the family that is invoked. Mati's father advises the couple, 'Man and wife are like tongue and teeth. Sometimes the teeth bite the tongue, but still the tongue doesn't try to leave the mouth. Its place is with the teeth'. This is the patriarchal logic Ndaxte is asked to live out. The above proverb explains the patriarchal environment that gives the male great leeway as the superior human being, to exploit this logic with impunity to emphasise his control over the woman, even by violent means. Patriarchy, in Ezell's (in Tracy 2007:578) words, creates:

An environment ripe for abuse... [Although a] weakened immune system does not create the virus that leads to deadly infection ... it provides the environment in which the virus can thrive and do its killing. Patriarchal beliefs weaken the marital system so that the deadly virus of violence can gain a stronghold.

Ndaxte, for the first time, exercises her human freedom by refusing to return to an abusive and violent relationship with Biraan.

In *Madame Brouette*, women's economic independence is portrayed as linked to their ability to negotiate positions of respect in the community. This is seen when Mati's father accepts her in his home. When he later repudiates her for falling pregnant out of wedlock and in his home, one can understand his reason for doing this as a religious person who needs to protect his image in the face of public opinion. He remains a caring father compared to Nanyuma's father in *Finzan*, who refuses to give his daughter accommodation when she



refuses to be inherited by her brother-in-law. Mati's father demonstrates that tradition is responding to changing circumstances. In this suburban context, which is different from the traditional village setting, Mati's father is happy to receive his daughter's financial contributions to maintain the family. Mati's socio-economic position as a provider significantly shifts power relations in the family.

Despite her unorthodox position as a single mother, Mati earns the respect of the community and the viewer because of her independence of mind and hard work in earning a decent living to overcome poverty; this while many in her situation do so through corruption and debasing themselves. Everyone in this poor social setting tries, in various ways, to rise above the material poverty around them (Petty 2009:107). Mati's unflinching ambition is to open a canteen on the beach to attain her economic independence. In this resolve, she is like the protagonist in Sembène's *Faat Kiné*, also a single mother, who outgrows her negative experiences and moves forward.

### Husbands undeserving of good wives

Throughout the film, Sene Absa underscores that men who unreasonably mistreat their wives do not deserve them. This view is expressed explicitly by one of the male witnesses interviewed by the journalists at the murder scene of Naago. The relationship between Ndaxte and Biraan also effectively brings this out. The three women – Ndaxte, Mati and Mati's mother – ridicule Biraan's 'authority' when he demands that Ndaxte return to 'his' home to fulfil her conjugal obligations. The women remind him that a woman is above all a human being who deserves respect. Their failed marriage critiques the practice of arranged marriages that are contracted without love. Ndaxte and Biraan are cousins whose union was arranged by their fathers, without consideration for their feelings. She does not have any form of interaction with Biraan before their marriage. In a way, Biraan remains a stranger to her; Ndiaga was the man she would have loved to marry. In her unhappy state, she confides to Mati, 'They stole my heart and ruined my life'. Abusive marital relationships are not limited to cases of arranged marriages only; Mati, who moves in with Naago, because she loves him also does not get the happiness she deserves.

*Madame Brouette* is set in a wolf-eats-wolf world where it is difficult for women to survive without male patronage. That Mati maintains her independence and dignity in such a corrupt environment reflects women's strength and tenacity. Her unhappy experience in a previous marriage does not turn her cynical towards men. She falls in love again and warms to the

possibility of a happy marriage when she encounters the charming flattery of the criminal police officer, Naago, who is nothing more than a lecher with no intention of making a permanent commitment to any woman. His interest is in the conquest of one pretty woman after the other; this is something he boasts about to other men. He nonchalantly describes himself as a hybrid of sorts: a Muslim from waist to feet (so he can have many women) and a Christian from stomach to head (so he can eat pork and drink beer). Nevertheless, both Mati and her daughter Ndeye are charmed by Naago, whom they see as a possible husband and father figure respectively. Their first encounter flatters both mother and daughter, especially his manifestation of generosity (Petty 2009:107).

When her trust is soon disappointed, Mati courageously breaks links with Naago, whose debauched and lecherous lifestyle proves dangerous to her and her daughter. In the first place, the breaking of the news of her pregnancy does not excite Naago, because he does not want to be pinned down by responsibilities. Mati decides to open her dream canteen at the beach and fend for her family as a single parent. She tells Naago, who tries to escape from responsibility by an offer of money, 'I will manage like I have always managed... Love is not something you try. Live your life the way you want. I will live mine the way I can'. She refuses the 10 000 francs he offers her as a send-off. Just like Biraan does with Ndaxte, Naago comes looking for Mati and eventually weaves his way back into her life. Mati's reacceptance of Naago surprises both Ndaxte and Ndeye. She accepts him back in the hope that Naago will provide them with the protection they need in this environment infested with criminals. Their relationship, however, degenerates into unhappiness and Naago becomes a threat to their security.

It is inaccurate to say that Naago does not care about Mati – in his contorted way, he helps her and even plans for the baptism of the child they are expecting. Just as he engages in criminal activities with the likes of London, the criminal gang leader, he is at times sickened by the atmosphere of crime that engulfs him. On the night of Tajaboon, in his restless drunken stupor, Naago expresses, at intervals, his frustration about being in this corrupt place. In this sense, he is as much a victim as the people living in the 'underworld'. He is attracted to Mati because he desires to be a better person and he thinks that possibility lies with her, for he cannot help himself. Mati also realises she cannot ask more of him and she cannot even be jealous of his unrestrained interest in women. All she asks of him is respect for her, a pregnant mother. The complexity of their relationship expresses the core question Sene Absa poses in making this film when he says,



I wanted to explore the nature of love, discover why some people remain together for thirty years and others just two months. Why certain women decide at 35 that they don't want anything more to do with men! I wanted to paint the portrait of these women [in the special features of the film].

Mati's sexuality is portrayed as an attractive life force that draws Naago inexorably. She has the kind of dynamic and creative energy that enlivens those to whom she relates (Nzegwu 2011:253–270). This force explains why Naago comes back to Mati, even if he is not a responsible man. She sees his need for redemption through her and takes him back.

Mati, who tries to maintain her decency in this corrupt environment, retorts sharply to a taxi driver who tries to caution her about men and particularly Naago and his exploratory interest in women. The taxi driver refers to all women as being 'the same' as far as men are concerned. Mati firmly tells him that she is not 'the same' as the rest of the women. In several ways, the film demonstrates how extraordinary she is. She is independent-minded in her relationships with men and her achievements come through solid hard work. However difficult it is for her to secure a licence for her business, Mati refuses to yield to the pressure to 'give sex' in exchange for the document – which is the lot of the rest of the women. She courageously refuses the proposal of London, the fearsome drug dealer, to collaborate with him in a marijuana business at her strategically located beach canteen in exchange for millions of francs. Keeping clean in such an environment is daunting for a single mother.

Mati's disposition contrasts with the young women who hang around Naago and London and are quick to barter sex for small favours. In turn, these women are treated by London as mere sex objects. He makes them work for him as prostitutes under very risky conditions. The women are too scared to stand up to him as they are totally dependent on him for their daily survival. London, who only cares about how much money they bring in, does not provide any form of security and endlessly complains when their turnover is below his expectations. He considers himself already too generous in providing them with cheap condoms as a favour he can withdraw if they do not earn more. He tells them, 'I only buy them [condoms] because I have a heart! I could make you work without them... You could all die like dogs for all I care!'

The parallel editing effectively brings out Mati's strength of character, especially on the night she gives birth, which coincides with Tajaboon. Naago, drenched in alcohol, merges with the rest of the town in celebrating Tajaboon instead of being next to Mati at the clinic. As she is being rushed to the clinic,

the insensitive, carousing crowds block the progress of the taxi in which she suffers labour pains. The revelry of the men is contrasted with the pain she is going through. On this chaotic night, London and Naago plan to burn down the beach market of Ndayes Thiokeer, to cover up the trails of their crimes, while the community is drowned in festivities. This destructive plot is paralleled with the most sacred moment in a woman's life – childbirth. The mother's life force is being threatened by the men's revelry. The male and female factors appear here as opposing principles. At the clinic Mati is alone with her friend Ndaxte without a man to keep them company.

That Sene Absa particularly pays attention to the quality of life Mati wants to bring forth as a mother is important. She decides to have her baby in the best medical environment available, the Mamelles Clinic, a place that is frequented by the wealthy. The taxi driver is surprised that the owner of a canteen in a shanty town seeks to deliver her baby in an expensive clinic. In her place, he would have used such an amount of money to buy a car. Ndaxte herself thinks Mati is not being practical in choosing such an expensive clinic, especially now that they do not expect support from Naago for the baptismal expenses. The deliberate bureaucracy at the clinic also demonstrates that Mati's social class is not the same as those of the patients expected here. It is the credit-card class that comes here. All these point to the value Mati places on the safety of her baby. The entire process of Mati's ordeal to deliver her baby safely is intercut with the Tajaboon festival. Naago is totally drunk and when his drunken colleagues nearly molest Ndeye, who comes to inform him about Mati's condition, he cannot even protect her.

Sene Absa's empathy for Mati is evident in his portrayal of the male characters she relates to. Her lover, Naago, a police officer, is an accomplice to London, a notorious cartel leader. He borrows large sums of money from London so he can pursue his frivolous lifestyle. London, in turn, depends on him to cover his dirty tracks. His relationship with the taxi driver is similar; the police officer allows him to drive without a permit and insurance on condition that he agrees to transport him and do his errands whenever necessary. He describes this manipulative relationship between them as that between the anvil and the hammer, characterised by many hard knocks. Since neither has any moral authority to challenge the other, they coexist in corruption. The director edits in the sound of a hammer against an anvil in the background of the dialogue between Naago and the driver. As an officer of the law, Naago is totally compromised and incapable of rendering professional services to the



community. He represents the institutionalised corruption of the police force. Pretty females are arrested and harassed as ‘criminals’; while hard-core crooks on whose payrolls the police officers are, are left alone. The bribes they extort from such female ‘offenders’ come in the form of cash and sex.

The critique of the ineptitude of the police is further seen during the murder investigation. None of officers focuses on the right issue. Their attention is on wooing witnesses like Ndaxte. The one who appears professional, Captain Colombo, comes with a fixed hypothesis of a suicide case and does not listen to the testimonies of the actual witnesses of the murder. The journalists, similarly, are interested in their nervous hunt for juicy news and finding out what kind of woman Madame Brouette is. The perspectives of female and male witnesses on the murder of Naago reveal interesting gender undercurrents. All the testimonies of the women attest to Mati being an exceptional woman of high moral standards; she is intense and hardworking, generous and a good neighbour incapable of killing anybody, but above all, she does not allow herself to be pushed around by anybody. A woman witness comments that because men make the lives of women hell, even if Mati actually killed Naago, she should not be considered guilty because many of them wanted to see the ‘bastard’ dead. The view of the male witnesses, who have been frightened by this incident, is that Mati should be punished so that it will discourage women from starting ‘gunning us down like partridges!’ Interestingly, the comments of some men acknowledge that there are men who do not deserve their wives. The humorous response of a man to this is that, despite their meanness to women, it would be better for the woman to scratch or slap such men than to kill them. To yet another man, the suggestion that a woman may slap a man borders on blasphemy according to the Islamic domestic relations they subscribe to. The hilarious exchanges of self-criticism among the men point to the need for respect between the genders and a change of attitude towards women.

In this film where Sene Absa praises a strong woman, he portrays strong female bonds between three generations of women portrayed in the film. Although she cannot prevent the eviction of her daughter when she fell pregnant in her father’s home, Mati’s mother remains compassionate towards both Mati and Ndaxte whose first marriages failed. The relationship between Mati, her daughter Ndeye and Ndaxte is well-developed as a supporting bond in challenging times. It is this bond that Mati and Ndaxte transmit to the newborn at the clinic. The female witnesses at the murder scene show the same solidarity with Mati. Though they are sad that she is going to prison, Sene Absa makes her

exit like a hero with complete agency. When the sound of the gunshot that kills Naago is heard, the director inter-cuts to the caged bird that has been stationed in front of Mati's house. The bird struggles and shifts in its cage, to enhance the reading of Mati's ultimate act of liberation being her shooting of Naago. Before she willingly enters the police car, she symbolically frees the caged bird and gives the empty cage to her little daughter with the words, 'I'm like the partridge. I need my freedom'. She wants her daughter to grow up to be a freer person than she has been.

Mati is eulogised as the new woman who questions and challenges some of the traditional ways. She is a different kind of mother than that found in Senghorian poetry, where the woman as Mother is transcendental, symbolic, archetypal and removed from the everyday, as seen in Senghor's first collection of poetry, *Chant d'Ombre (Shadow Songs)* in 1945. The woman here is far from the idyllic mother, portrayed in the nostalgic Negritude poetry where she is associated with the past, the static, the bountiful, the reproductive and the ideals of motherhood (Fonchingong 2006). Madame Brouette is a contextual woman; a divorcee and a single mother who is yet respectable and dignified in the choices she makes. She refuses to abort the child in her womb against the practical advice of Ndaxte, who cautions her on how hard it is to bring up children as a single mother in such an environment. She chooses to assert life. Her killing of Naago is not premeditated, but a logical consequence of the cumulative effects of hurts. She explains to the commissioner as she gives herself up, 'It happened very fast' and 'I had no choice, that's all'. The filmmaker's advocacy for women is clear in this film. He stands for a more affectionate relationship between men and women in marriage. Marriage should enhance, rather than destroy happiness.

### Women in prostitution

In *Guelwaar*, Sembène portrays prostitution as an 'economic activity' women 'willingly' engage in to support their families. In this film in which Sembène continues the critique of the African leadership elite, his major protagonist, Pierre Henri Thioune, popularly called 'Guelwaar'<sup>8</sup> (Serra 1995:81), a Catholic leader, is murdered for his political activism and is mistakenly buried in a Muslim cemetery. In a social context in which the Christian minority and Muslim majority live in conflict, Sembène uses this fragment of reality to ponder crucial African questions. In a scathing speech delivered before international donors who supply 'hunger-stricken' Africa with food aid, Guelwaar openly



condemns this trend of leadership that has humiliated the continent for decades. This speech goes against the thanksgiving ritual expected on such occasions. Hence the national leaders find it too disturbing to let Guelwaar live. The death of Guelwaar, who is a symbol of Africa's decency, self-reliance and sense of honour, opens a Pandora's box for the continent and asks many questions about reclaiming its lost dignity. His death brings together his three living children, who are scattered around the globe and engaged in different occupations. His daughter Sophie, who works in the city in association with her friend Helene, is a professional prostitute. Sembène uses these two women to address the contradictions in which postcolonial Africa is caught and how women, especially, are caught up in this web.

'Noble' Guelwaar, who fights for the dignity of Africa, is himself caught up in the contradiction of claiming the dignity of his family. He is fully involved in activist protests in the public sphere, but he does not pay close attention to the internal incongruities in his domicile. At home he and his wife, Marie Nogoy, see 'dignity' differently. This is seen during the last quarrel the two have before Guelwaar leaves home, never to return alive. In this disagreement, Guelwaar's wife reproaches him for being overzealous in speaking against food aid and advises him not to attend the meeting. She deliberately reminds him about the 'degrading job' their daughter is doing in the city in order to feed the family. Guelwaar's dismissive response to his wife is to mind her domestic chores and not to meddle in public affairs. He tells her, 'I'd rather she [Sophie] were a prostitute than a beggar. I would rather see her dead than begging'. The 'woman's dignity', in this regard does not mean much to Guelwaar's pragmatism. As far as he is concerned, prostitution is a form of work which is better than begging. He tells his wife:

Do you think we could have survived our thirty years of marriage if you had been in charge? Woe betides the one who holds out his hand and waits for others to feed him and his family. I, Pierre Henri Thioune Guelwaar, will never wait for another man to feed my family. I'd rather die. I want you to know that.

Guelwaar's pride blinds him from realising that her daughter's lifestyle is a beggarly one in a way; though for him, any work that puts food on the table is good enough. This is a realistic reflection of the reason both men and women have turned to prostitution, especially in recent years. The issue of prostitution is a controversial one in Africa. Senegal is one of two African countries where it is fully legal and regulated – in a few other countries it is legal with prohibitions on brothels, while in most of Africa it is illegal, though the practice is active.



The underlying reason in all cases is the increase in poverty and scanty access to the basic necessities of life. The words of a young man involved in sex tourism with an elderly European woman expresses Africa's dilemma in this respect: 'Once I find a good job, I will get my dignity back. But now I'm a prostitute' (*Global Post* 2010).

A major contradiction is seen in 'revolutionary' Guelwaar's traditional attitude towards his wife. He confines her at home and expects to find her there when he returns home. He prefers to speak for women rather than let them speak for themselves; he dismisses his wife's advice and minimises her contributions to the family over the years. There is a marked difference between the public and the private Guelwaar. He eloquently challenges the police officer who accuses him of allowing women to discuss politics in his house. He defends the rights of women, as any other citizen, to lawfully discuss the situation in the country; yet Guelwaar himself dismisses his wife's views of his activism without a second thought. Serra views Guelwaar's family as a microcosm of Africa in general and his three children as 'three faces of indecisive Africa that, at different times, sells, surrenders and forgets its own roots; an Africa that is cripple, a prostitute and emigrant in the desperate search of self' [my translation from Italian subtitles] (Serra 1995:79).<sup>9</sup> At the moment of test, all three children manage to rise above their limitations. Despite his weaknesses, Guelwaar himself remains honourable in both words and actions.

Nogoy, who can be viewed as symbol of Mother Africa, considers her three children a disappointment: Barthelemy, who lives in France, is ashamed of his Senegalese identity and considers himself a Frenchman; Sophie is a prostitute and her mother is ashamed of her; Aloys, who lives with her, is a cripple. She lost the rest of her children at birth. As she laments Guelwaar's death, she is a lonely mother of 'adult children that are useless'. This is an expression of utter disillusionment. Nogoy, too, is riddled with contradictions. She is ashamed of Sophie's trade, but she admits it is her money that keeps the family going. Likewise, Aloys, 'that useless cripple', is portrayed as central in organising Guelwaar's funeral. He proves to be the most reliable family member because of his knowledge of the culture and the context. Barthelemy too, finally, reclaims his identity as a Senegalese and uses his diaspora experience of being between France and Africa to challenge the MP's divisive politics. In the course of the narrative, Sembène demonstrates that Nogoy is wrong in thinking her three children are useless, even though they have shortcomings.

Helene is the character through whom Sembène articulates the subject of prostitution. She tells Father Leon, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged', expressing



Sembène's message of compassion for such women, especially as all his characters are riddled with contradictions and human weaknesses. Sembène himself, as a filmmaker, is not excluded from contradictions, especially as he is also dependent on the West for funds to produce his films (Crespi 1992). In his criticism of the dependency on food aid, Guelwaar thus resembles Sembène the artist, who in an interview comments on this unhealthy dependence of Africa on the West:

Never, ever, ever, in the space of ten years, have I felt so humiliated by my society as now. They give us 'gifts': a few thousand dollars, worth of rice – mere chicken-feed. A society can't live on hand-outs. A society that has its own culture can confront all sorts of calamities and adversities with its head held high. I always say, if I were a woman, I'd never marry an African. Women should marry real men, not mentally deficient ones (Chreachain in Snipe 1998:80).

This quote expresses Sembène's frustration about the often-inevitable contradictions the African man faces to survive.

Sophie and Helene are Sembène's examples of unconventional women. He uses them to accentuate the contradictions in the lives of the characters. Sophie, who is rather ashamed to talk openly about her 'profession', is defensive whenever reference is made to it. She is aware that her mother is uncomfortable about it, though she too cannot deny that it is this disreputable business that sustains the family. Sembène represents prostitution (sex work) as an economic activity. Those who engage in it, as Tamale's research on this subject in Ugandan cities indicates, take it as a performance that ordinary women enter and exit at specific times and in specific venues. Most of those who engage in it do so as breadwinners for the household (Tamale 2011:158). In this film, Sophie is involved in prostitution because she must do so for the sake of her family and she is ashamed of this. At the funeral of Guelwaar, which is the only time viewers see her, there is nothing about her physical appearance and manners to show that she is a prostitute. In contrast, Helene is abrasive in revealing her practice and her expressive costume in the context of Guelwaar's funeral gives her away. The low camera angle captures her theatrically posing and looking down at the ongoing funeral preparations. She dramatically lights and puffs a cigarette, sending the smoke curling in the faces of the men staring at and gossiping about her. The camera often isolates her to emphasise her unique appearance in this context. Sembène deliberately 'intrudes' her presence to introduce a new social problem the African woman faces.

Helene provocatively presents her 'manifesto' as a prostitute to Father Leon to pre-empt the judgement of the men watching her. Apparently, she is a proud

mouthpiece for prostitutes. She gives an air of independence and professionalism to her practice. As she dramatises her speech to the priest, a group of men in the background watch her with mixed feelings of lust and condemnation. The camera focuses on the prominent cross she wears as Father Leon approaches her with a Bible in hand. He approaches her cautiously in disapproval at her lack of decorum in dress and manners. In their dialogue, Helene dominates and the priest listens.

Sembène's motive in this dialogue is to lead the audience from judging the prostitute to understanding her. The viewer comes to appreciate why Helene and Sophie have ended up as prostitutes: they failed to find decent employment despite their professional college certificates. It was a tough decision Helene made to become a prostitute after six months of searching for work. As a registered prostitute she lives daily in fear of contracting diseases, despite submitting herself to weekly medical check-ups as the national regulation requires. She had to sacrifice her life so that 'no one in my family has to beg'. She now sponsors her brother in the medical school and provides the money her father needs to make religious pilgrimages. The very cross she wears, she tells Father Leon, is a gift her father brought on his return from the consecration of the church of Notre Dame de la Paix and it has been blessed by the Pope himself. She was herself among the first at the airport to welcome His Holiness the Pope when he visited Dakar. Helene also speaks for Sophie who sponsored Guelwaar's pilgrimage to Jerusalem. She ends her long discourse with, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged. That's the word of God' (Luke 6:37).

At the end of this triumphant performance, Helene is surprised by Father Leon's non-judgmental attitude when he gently tells her to dress decently because she is in a house of mourning. This makes her drop her defensive attitude before the priest who treats her with kindness. Because of his kindness, she becomes aware of the inappropriateness of her dress and allows herself to be led away by Father Leon as the rest of the men stare at her with hostility. Sembène draws attention to the hypocrisy of the men who condemn her as a prostitute and at the same time comment on her sex appeal. Tamale's (2011:146) research among prostitutes in Uganda also shows this attitude of loathing and desire the men exhibit in this film conforms to reality. In spite of her apparently blithe presentation of prostitution as pleasurable, Helene is ultimately bothered by her lifestyle. The point of her 'lecture' to the priest is to dare the man who is considered to be the symbol of the community morality with the question: 'How dare you judge me when you depend on me to feed you in this rotten economy?' Helene takes up a subversive stance in 'defence' of her trade because society



does not appreciate her. Both she and Sophie represent women as sacrificial lambs and victims of the social structure. They are condemned by society (the family) for the unconventional business they engage in and at the same time they are expected to feed the family. Drawing from the biblical text, Sembène calls for empathy for this category of women (Luke 7:36–50).

## The feminine in the public sphere

As I pointed out in Chapter 2, Queen Sarraounia's entry into public leadership required the destruction of her femininity before she could be admitted into the mainstream. My discussion now focuses on the queen's leadership despite the socialisation Dawa, her mentor, gave her in childhood. Sarraounia remains single though she has lovers and male admirers in her court. From Dawa's mentorship, she would grow up using these men to give her pleasure, but they would not dominate her. This sounds like an inversion of the way powerful men use women as pleasure objects with no desire for a permanent commitment. As a warrior leader, Sarraounia emerges as a formidable freedom fighter who attributes her success to the community she leads. Although she is the central character and the title of the film takes her name, it is not the queen who fills the greater part of the screen. The feminine principle of sharing marks her leadership in the filmmaker's framing. Petty (1996:188) observes the following about this trend:

Rarely is her screen presence divorced from that of her people. Her presence transcends the diegetic so that she is read through the actions of her people. Her desire for solidarity and dignity and her promise of eternity to the loyal (by association with her name when the griot sings her praises) ensures that cultural identity becomes the collective heroine of the film.

She is only isolated at the beginning of the film when her foster father and mentor initiates her into her predestined role. Once she assumes the throne of the Aznas, she is often filmed mixing with the people, except when she speaks. Emphasis, in this case, is put on collective engagement rather than individual heroism. This appears to cohere with Gabriel's distinction of Third Cinema characters from Hollywood ones where the difference lies in group and individual performances, respectively (Gabriel 1989:48).

Sarraounia, as a character, introduces the controversy, relevant in contemporary times, as to whether or not a woman can combine motherhood with a public (political) role. That Dawa initiates her into the science of preventing menstruation and conception, principal feminine identity markers,

suggests that for a woman to be successful in the public sphere she has to sacrifice not only motherhood, but also eradicate in herself the ‘childish, sensual pleasure’ associated with femininity, that Dawa speaks of during her initiation. The implication is that a woman who goes by this path must be exceptional. The queen’s patriotic, pan-African speech to the army, urging them to defend their dignity against the French soldiers, shows that she lives her ‘unsexed’ identity confidently. She tells her army:

I gave you the pride of being Aznas. I did not give you a son, but I shall leave you more than life. I will leave the Aznas a **name**. The Fulanis die to go to heaven, but we die to leave a **name**. He who dies without a **name** dies forever. When our bodies turn to dust only our **name** survives. Our musicians and Grandsons will sing our **name**. Today we fight to uphold our dignity and to leave a **name**. We fight those who want to dominate and to humiliate us [my emphasis].

In this speech, Hondo emphatically inverts the concept of ‘leaving a name’, which in the African context means having descendants to continue one’s line of progeny (Okiria 2011). He underlines that great deeds immortalised by the griot (the artist) are the most imperishable names a person can leave behind. Sarraounia has become famous not by the children she has left behind, but by her courageous leadership against imperialism. She is an exceptional woman. Although the director acknowledges through his portrayal of her that a woman’s public role could be equally important to that of men, he validates it by denying her motherhood. This portrayal enhances Johnson’s argument that patriarchal logic offers exceptional women high offices on its own terms. He explains:

Any woman who dares strive for standing in the world beyond the sphere of caring relationships must choose between two very difficult cultural images of who she is and who she ought to be. For her to assume real public power – as in politics, corporation, or her church – she must resolve a contradiction between her cultural based identity as a woman on the one hand and the male identified position that she occupies on the other. For this reason, the more powerful a woman is under patriarchy, the more ‘unsexed’ she becomes in the eye of others as her female cultural identity recedes beneath the mantle of male-identified power and the masculine identity associated with it (Johnson 2005:8).

This quote explains Sarraounia’s entry into public leadership. The director’s motive, however, is to give tribute to her ability as a pan-African leader who strives to unite the warring African nationalities to ward off French imperialism. Before she is joined by the Fulani prince, Sarraounia has three male associates in the inner circle of her court: her foster father, Dawa; her lover, Baka and the griot. On various occasions, she consults Dawa for advice; Baka is both



her esteemed warrior and lover and the griot is the historian and musician who immortalises events. Her defeminisation by Dawa notwithstanding, Sarraounia brings a feminine approach to her leadership. She depends on the people she leads; her role as a leader is to rally their support. Although she listens to her people, she does not allow her authority to be minimised by any of her subordinates, not even by her lover and esteemed warrior, Baka. Hondo represents how the queen conducts her private and public affairs in the quarrel between her and Baka. When Baka proves insubordinate, she makes it clear to him that she respects him and the kingdom values him as a great warrior, but she will not allow him the licence of insubordination. I concur with Petty (1996:189) when she notes that:

Sarraounia's confrontation with her lover Baka is not a lovers' quarrel or a declaration of Sarraounia's emancipation (when Sarraounia is still a child, her protector describes her future with men: 'The male will be as object of pleasure for you, not an arrogant, egotistical master'). It is just simply an affirmation of the queen's desire to lead the attack against the enemy in a way she feels will best ensure the preservation of her Kingdom's identity.

Contrary to her foster father's prophecy, Sarraounia's relationship with Baka (and men) is not driven by the desire to dominate. She emphasises the need for mutual respect between them as persons holding different offices in the same kingdom. She does not treat Baka as an object of pleasure. She transcends the male paradigm that her foster father taught her. As a leader who looks at the bigger picture, she does not get distracted by Baka's tantrums and she does not plead with him to stay when he threatens to break away from the army because of their disagreement on military strategy. Sarraounia challenges him by shifting the discussion from personal disagreements to the larger interest of defending the integrity of the Azna people. She gives him the freedom to choose to stay or leave. The community is more important than the individual; Sarraounia and the Azna can go on without Baka. When Baka later returns with his strong men to join the queen in battle, she jubilantly welcomes them back. The dialogue between him and the queen underscores that both value the common good.

Baka: I have come at a good time to take my place among your men.

Sarraounia: I welcome you! Your presence is a comfort to me. We need your experience and skill. Welcome! Your bravery does you honour [reverse close-up shots reveal their smiles and genuine happiness].

Sarraounia brings a feminine approach to her leadership. She tries to avoid confrontation and encourages collaboration and cooperation. Baka, therefore, has no reason to be threatened since she values everyone's contributions: it is not herself, the queen, who is responsible for the success of their mission, but the entire community (Vaughan 2002; Johnson 2005). As a 'strong queen', Sarraounia is portrayed as both vulnerable and strong for her power depends upon the people. The camera captures her, moving among the soldiers as they prepare for battle. She is indistinguishable from them, except for the authority of her words. She is worried about the safety and success of her army against the French and she consults supernatural forces to bring good fortune to her people, because she acknowledges that, as a human being, she is weak. This makes her as vulnerable as any other human being. Her reputation as a 'fetish queen' is a rumour contradicted by her real struggles to overcome her fears so that she can inspire confidence in her army. Despite the praise songs that make her appear larger than life, the viewer sees her as one who works hard to maintain discipline within her kingdom and uses tact in her administration of the male majority. The griot's praise songs propagate her reputation as 'one with iron claws' to crush her enemies, the one who has 'the skill of the panther' to crush the bones of her prey and the one whose strength is invincible. The role of the griot is not only to praise her extraordinary ability as a warrior queen, but also to keep enemies at bay by propagating her invincible reputation. Her enemies refer to her as a 'sorcerer', a 'witch', a 'fetish queen', and 'the devil herself'. In their view, Sarraounia's military power and intelligence can only be explained in terms of supernatural powers. A 'real' woman cannot be in the kind of office she holds. This sexist attitude is shown by the marauding French troops when they reach her court. They are surprised to find an assortment of feminine, quality items: silk, gold and jewellery, which make them wonder what sort of 'witch' she is. Indeed, Captain Voulet could have avoided the fight with the queen's army were it not for his imperialist and sexist arrogance. He tells his colleague who cautions him against marching towards the queen's empire which is not in their sphere of influence:



You don't know how the blacks think! To them she is a myth, a devil with magical powers. If we don't conquer her, it's a victory to the blacks and a great blow to our French prestige. The minor chiefs who have surrendered will rebel... That witch has no religion. She escaped conversion to Islam. So to annex her land to France is a service to Christianity!

Captain Voulet's reason to conquer the queen assumes grand proportions because he cannot be seen 'to be afraid of a mere woman'. He uses this to provoke his mercenaries to commit atrocities. In the same way, Sarraounia's enemies from the Sokoto empire feel more humiliated because she who has vanquished them in war is only a woman. Against this, Sarraounia's empire respects her as their efficient leader. Her gender does not seem important because they have experienced her leadership as fair and visionary.

Hondo's portrayal of the queen rejects stereotypes. In her dynamism, Sarraounia is a model for statesmanship, militarism, feminist liberation and pan-Africanism. As a statesperson, she makes tough decisions in challenging times. As a militant, she leads her army in battle and fights side by side with them. As a feminist, she asserts her authority over her subjects without lording it over them; she does not have to prove anything in her relationships with men. She remains independent of male control, yet she depends upon men to govern the affairs of her territory. She is neither mother nor wife, yet she commands the respect of her community. This is a revolutionary slant in a cultural context where motherhood is regarded as women's primal role. As Clark's research among South African black women emphasises:

In many parts of the world a woman is seen as an oddity as a result of not claiming or performing motherhood as a central aspect of her identity. In the African context it is not uncommon for children to be 'given' to women who do not have biological children or whose children have died or no longer living with her (Clark nd).

With her portrayal as an exceptional woman, Sarraounia opens space for women to enter public administration, though this, in male-centred communities, still exacts a price from females. Traditionally, the avenue for women to attain respect and prestige is through motherhood. Sarraounia's portrayal transcends this value, making her revolutionary in this context. She represents the challenging and tough decisions women make in balancing family and public office. Succeeding in both often takes a big toll on the woman in hegemonic patriarchal structures.

The evident feminine parameter Sarraounia brings to her leadership is the unitarian/communitarian approach that makes her an icon of pan-Africanism in

the film. She rallies the warring ethnicities to unite as no form of collaboration will spare them from the French imperialism. The factions need to play down their small differences and focus on the bigger vision of African unity and identity. Her address to the groups that have taken refuge with her is infused with this vision of unity that challenges all to rise above all forms of sectarianism.

Brothers and sisters from the other tribes, we welcome you. We have different languages, different beliefs. But we all share the same desire to be free. You know the pains of being slaves to a tyrant, who wounds the dignity you hold so dear. Deserting this tyrant does you honour and honour to all black men. Brothers and sisters from other tribes, our community is tolerant. Everyone lives according to his customs and principles. Worship any god you please: sky, earth, fire, the gods of lightning or the crocodile god. Pray in any fashion you choose. Your soul is your own responsibility. No one will scorn your customs or the use you make of your property or body. Respect our fetishes and we will respect yours. In the land of the Aznas, enjoy dignity and brotherly love. We will be cousins in prosperity. Brothers and sisters from other tribes, you are welcome. We must learn that to stay free we must fight a relentless battle.

Throughout this long speech, the camera focuses more on the people than on the queen's speaking, except at the end of the speech, a medium shot frames her together with the prince of Sokoto who has fought beside her. The point the filmmaker underscores is that Sarraounia's is a shared rather than an individual heroism as her leadership model emphasises the collective rather than the individual. The queen's pan-African message of unity in diversity and respect for individual differences in building community is what Hondo idealises. Unlike the neighbouring kingdoms ruled by men, she has not waged war on her neighbours to force the ways of the Aznas upon them. It is because she leads by example that the prince of Sokoto crosses from his father's sectarian leadership to fight by her side. As he breaks away from his father who would rather ally with the French in order to crush the 'infidel' queen, he questions his father about the logic of forcing the queen to accept their ways when she has neither threatened their peace nor forced her gods upon them. Sarraounia's speech is wide-ranging on the need to struggle against any form of imperialism: cultural, political, colonial and global. This echoes what Hondo (1995:340) says on the issue of intolerance, which has forced Africans, including artists, to live in exile:

Let us keep our diversity; let us be suspicious of the concept of universalism, which is a dangerous thing. I think we do not have to copy one another, whether among Africans or by continent... We all have our specificity.



My reading of Hondo's portrayal of Sarraounia is imbedded in realistic contradictions surrounding the life of contemporary women in public administration. It is as though the filmmaker does not know how to handle the situation of encouraging inspiring women to pursue public administration, but at the same time shows awareness of the entrenched logic of patriarchy that controls and moderates everything. Sarraounia remains a challenging possibility; in the higher enclaves of power, male dominance is still the order of the day in society just as she is exceptional in the film. This minimal presence of women in decision-making in contemporary politics is what feminists are still fighting for. There is still strict gatekeeping in the category of high offices males and females occupy. The difference in Sarraounia is that, although she entered the mainstream on a male ticket, she brings a feminine touch to her governance, which is characterised by a communal rather than individual style of leadership. She exercises leadership along the feminine principle of cooperation and this makes all the difference. The more positive presence of African women in politics, with their specificity as women, is what society needs to invest in to balance power.

To appreciate the uniqueness of Sarraounia's leadership, it is important to compare the atmosphere in her court with that of the French. The spaces associated with her seem to be gender blind, since all are united by the same desire to defend their dignity against French imperialism. Against this, the discourses in the French court are characterised by racism and sexism. Women are totally objectified, as the French value them on the basis of 'whiteness' as the yardstick for femininity. Here atrocity is portrayed as a 'value' for which the mercenaries are rewarded. The more atrociously a soldier behaves, the more rewards he gets and women are among the prized rewards. In one of the scenes, soldiers are rewarded with two women and two oxen each for handing pairs of human hands severed from African victims to Captain Voulet. Women are, at best, the superior objects of reward. The more beautiful women are allocated to the Frenchmen. Otherwise, the ordered rape of black women by the mercenaries is one of the sports the French officers relish. In their grading of femininity according to the lightness of the skin, the African woman is ranked lowest. Though Oriental women are tolerable, the officers consider real femininity and womanhood to be white. For instance to encourage the mercenaries to fight on, Captain Voulet entices them with gifts of Tuareg women who he describes to be as 'white as French women'. This objectification of (black) women that the African mercenaries later renounce when they regain consciousness and

refuse to fight the queen, is portrayed as issuing from the whites and is later appropriated by African men during colonialism (Hondo 1996:190). This portrayal affirms what feminists like Bennett say about the objectification and devaluation of black women that set in on the continent with colonialism. The colonial gaze

is seen as intensely violent, shoving human beings in complex and diverse forms of social and political organization into new and distorted categories of humanity. In British colonial contexts, within the 21st century, such categories included ‘our women’, ‘European women’, ‘native women’, ‘non-European women’, ‘coloured women’, ‘black women’, ‘white women’, ‘African women’ ... the violence is an epistemological and discursive one, wrapping human beings into categories of otherness alien to their own ways of being and working and useful only to the operation of class formation and the extraction of local labour (Bennett 2011b:25).

When they finally come to realise that under the leadership of Captain Voulet they are heading towards inexorable moral and physical destruction, the mercenaries begin to ask some significant questions; for instance, why should they accept their use as the killers of blacks? They begin to analyse the situation and to regret their earlier actions in fighting on the side of the French to conquer African freedom fighters like Samory, who would not have been defeated by the French soldiers alone. This critical thinking leads to a mutiny by the soldiers. The leader of the mutineers addresses the agitated men:

The white men have betrayed us! They’re leading us to our death. They’re insane! They want to destroy all black villages [reaction from the soldiers whose voices are raised in disgruntlement]. They’ve leapt in hell and have taken us with them. We obeyed them and betrayed Samory [reaction of anger among the soldiers]. But this is where we stop. We’ll go no further. I swear by my Grandfather, I will go no further!

These mercenaries have come to realise that the materialism – honour, gold and women – that the French have promised them has made them lose their most important value: respect for human beings. For this, they turn their guns on Voulet and kill him in order to regain their humanity.

The narrative structure of this film moves in a dialogic manner. As the queen’s army becomes larger and the Africans become more assertive of their identity, the French become less powerful, disorganised and more vulnerable. Earlier stereotypical comments made by the French about black people are progressively questioned and broken. Hondo demystifies the power of the French soldiers who want the Africans to perceive them as ‘demi-gods’ by exposing their weakness before the blacks and showing them as ‘poor humans’. This demystification humanises the Africans who have been objectified as ‘the



other' by the French. The childless queen, whose praise is sung by the griot, has given them their dignity back. The director has integrated pan-African and feminist discourses in this film that pays homage to women in the fight against imperialism (Emery 1988:39; Petty 1996:185). The contradictions in Sarraounia's portrayal notwithstanding, the film offers the possibility for women to make it in public political life.

The griot's homage is both to Sarraounia, who is among the great African historical leaders, and to the artist whose role it is to keep memory alive (Gabriel 2000). Nothing would remain of great deeds of the past if it were not for the griot (artist/historian) who captures them vividly, as he sings:

What would remain of great exploits if we did not have our musician with his rich memories and vivid songs? Who would ever remember Sunjata Keyita's extraordinary courage, if it were not for Jeli Jakuma, his talented musician and faithful companion? Who would remember great Babemba's supreme sacrifice in the blood-drenched ruins of Sokoto? What would remain of men's actions when they vanish, when their bodies turn to dust? Nothing but obscure oblivion, oblivion like ashes – cold dead ashes after a forest fire. For men's memory is brief. Not even the most glorious exploits would survive time without the undying devotion of singers and musicians. They immortalise them and keep them alive through the ages – Sarraounia!

The film's end reiterates the queen's feminine style of leadership. In a static high-camera framing, all the people, who are actually the heroes, not often acknowledged, move together through the static camera view, beginning with the leaders: Sarraounia, Baka, the Prince of Sokoto, Dawa, the griot down to the last man in the crowd. Together, they are a people with a common destiny. Under Sarraounia's leadership, they are a prophetic symbol of African unity. The role of art and history is to keep such memories alive.

## Male victims under patriarchy

In both *Finzan* and *Moolaadé* the filmmakers show that patriarchal tyranny can no longer hold; times have changed and change is gradually taking over. Elders who demonstrate excessive tyranny<sup>10</sup> risk being disobeyed by the young men who are supposed to continue their legacies. In *Finzan*, a young man, Zan, raises a stick to strike his father who has provoked him to anger. The reason for the quarrel between father and son is about the ownership of the shared space called 'home/house'. The father's use of the personal pronoun, 'my' in reference to this space that is shared by the rest of the family shows that he is the one who has rights in the home and this ownership gives him the prerogative to enforce

his views on all. The young man challenges his father and argues that he has as much right to feel at home because the ‘house belongs to us all’. Similarly, in *Yaaba*, a husband dismisses his wife from ‘his’ house just as Nanyuma cannot be accepted back in her ‘father’s’ house after leaving her deceased husband’s home. Through *Zan*, the filmmaker brings to the fore the need to democratise the family dynamic, where all have the right to feel comfortable. The power attributed to the authority of the father, especially in films set in precolonial Africa, is still very strong. The fathers refuse that their authority be questioned. Even after provoking his son to almost commit the taboo of striking him if it were not for the mother’s timely intervention, all the old man can tell his wife to reassert his threatened authority is, ‘If you had not prevented me, I would have killed him’. However, the tyrannical father’s loss of power is evident to the viewer despite his claims to the contrary.

In *Tilai*, Ouédraogo develops characters that are even bolder in challenging patriarchy. He employs both young men and women to question the rule of the father when it turns tyrannical. The patriarch who remains alive at the end of the film is greatly weakened when he loses his vibrant sons on account of his rigidity. Saga, the major protagonist, is angry and feels cheated by his father, who after promising him a wife goes back on his word. When his father decides to marry the promised bride as his second wife, Saga loses respect for his father. The experience Saga gathers in two years’ absence from the community makes him see things in a radically different way. He can no longer accommodate his father’s authority without challenging it. He chooses to live on the margins of the community where he erects his hut. His relationship with his loving mother stands in stark contrast with his relationship with his father, who now considers him an enemy for contradicting him. The mother’s love remains soothing against the crushing weight of patriarchal authority. When he is finally forced into a life of exile when his brother spares his life, despite the community’s death-sentence judgement for committing ‘incest’ with Nogma, Saga takes refuge with his maternal aunt, who is an ‘extension’ of his mother.

The reason for his initial departure from the community is not clear. His portrayal, however, represents the principle of search that is a recurrent theme as seen in films like *Wend Kuuni*, *Buud Yam* and *Yeelen*, discussed in Chapter 4. He takes a journey from his community in the manner of the romantic hero’s search that arises out of questions about and general dissatisfaction with the status quo. His search is motivated by a desire to find some answers and on his return home, just like the romantic hero, Saga is disenchanted and can no longer fit into his rigid patriarchal society; though he remains committed to it because his



mother, who represents a different value, lives there too. He tragically remains a harnessed insider/outsider who cannot quite share the ‘new vision’ he has returned with, as long as the patriarch rules the family. The news of his mother’s fatal illness forces him to return to the community that considers him dead. It is effective that Ouédraogo makes Saga die inside this rigid community that will be forced to deal with his death. When Kougri is forced to kill the brother he has spared who has sworn never to return to the community, the viewer experiences how tragic and miserable patriarchy ultimately is. It destroys the members it depends on for its continuity. With the defiant departure of Kougri into exile, the patriarch has lost both sons. The powerlessness of this self-destructive social structure is captured in the blank stare of the lonely old man who watches his son walk away and the high camera angle that frames this community as ‘doomed’ if it does not change course.

The cyclical structure of the film, where the opening and closing shots are similar, gives the impression that nothing has changed in this community. Indeed, the social structure may have remained intact, but some changes have happened. Namenaba, the symbol of patriarchal authority, appears as rigid at the end of the film as he is at the beginning. But he has undeniably lost two sons. The silence that grips everybody at the end of the film is heavy with foreboding. At the beginning of the film, the high camera frames the community as trapped, with a low angle on Saga who looks down on the village as he blows the horn to announce his presence. The ennobling angle and positive energy associated with Saga shows the director’s attitude toward oppressive patriarchy that needs shifting. In the final sequence, the wastefulness of Saga’s tragic death as he honours his mother is taken in high angle that traps this community as depressing in its ways. One patriarch had earlier committed suicide as a matter of honour when his rebellious daughter reignited the ‘incestuous’ relationship with Saga while the community expected her to treat him as a son. Now Saga, the dynamic male character, dies with the noble mother. The director suggests a possibility of hope in the second son who walks away from the community. From the entrapping shot of death, Kougri walks out into the open expanse of land. This is the first, definitive act of defiance by Kougri, who has always been timid and undecided on the stand to take with regard to his father’s authority. He now chooses to go the way of Saga – to become an outsider like him – to be able to challenge his community meaningfully; for this enclosed society cannot save itself. What it does is turn sons into rebels. The possibility of change is seen through this gradual process, where sons resist the autocratic rules of patriarchs.

Ibrahima's relationship with his father in *Moolaadé* is even more dramatic. He breaks away from the violent strain of masculinity his father represents, yet he is the heir to the throne. His decision to marry Amsatou and risk disinheritance as heir to the Dougoutigui (chief) is a rupture of the traditional order that refuses any revision in gender relationships.<sup>11</sup> Sembène further underscores the impossibility of absolute control by evoking the traditional wisdom (symbol) of *moolaadé* that can be used by the weak to protect themselves against the powerful. The *moolaadé* symbol is a simple piece of string tied across the entry to the homestead which provides protection for the children. Simple as it is, it is potent. To draw attention to the power in the symbol, Sembène's camera focuses on it from time to time. The men, as well as the *salindana* who pass by, stop and contemplate the symbol before moving on for they know how powerless they are to reverse the invocation. It is the sign that the vulnerable can, after all, be protected within the overwhelming weight of patriarchal authority. As long as Collé does not pronounce the symbolic word to revoke the protection, nobody can take the girls away from her. But the same culture has an interpretation that offers a way out for Collé to utter the sacred word. In Islam a husband is interpreted to have unlimited power over his wife, he may therefore demand of her to utter the redemptive word publicly to bring an end to the *moolaadé* protection. The 'religious' patriarchs now capitalise on the manipulative interpretation of Scripture in their favour. Urgent pressure from the male hierarchy in the family and the community force Ciré to assert his masculinity by making his wife submit publicly to his authority. Amath, his elder brother, has always thought that Collé dominates her husband, who usually communicates amicably with his wives. In order to subordinate Collé, Amath now challenges Ciré to prove his manhood publicly. When Amath forces the leather whip into his hand to subjugate his wife, Ciré panics and confesses, 'I have never beaten a woman before. Not even my daughter'. He is literally pushed to the village square to perform this act of control and domination. During the performance he suffers as much as Collé does. After the ordeal, both are supported home by community members. Both have been brutalised by patriarchy. In explaining patriarchy's obsession with power and the hierarchy of masculinity, Hierro (1994:179) explains:

Since it is the case that in the patriarchal system control over women is the necessary condition for the existence of the moral order which legitimates political control of the group over the totality, all men feel compelled to demonstrate their superiority over women employing all the devices that we know and suffer from.



The film presents this not as a natural thing, but as a performance men are rigorously socialised into from childhood and which is reinforced at different stages as they live their male identity, which obviously is not unitary. Vaughan (2000) draws attention to this when she comments on the regime men have to go through to conform to this identity that does not come easy:

Manhood thus becomes a performance in a way that being a woman does not. The girl is typically encouraged to continue nurturing like her mother who is a model ready to hand while the boy is encouraged to perform according to a 'script'.... It is the manhood script that denies the emotions that are necessary for identifying and responding to needs and therefore the needs themselves. Moreover the specific need for status comes from a society in which male dominance is replayed in many different areas.

The portrayal of Ciré shows the fallacy in this hierarchal stereotyping of the genders. Not all men act out violently or take repressive masculine roles in relation to their wives. They may be forced to do so through external pressures as it is in this case. It further underscores the inaccuracy of speaking about masculinity in a generic way, since it has many faces (Dipio 2010:95; Downing 2010:116; Ojaide 2010). Stereotypes are learned and they can also be unlearned. Ciré was terrorised by public opinion into executing violence in order to conform to a group identity. At the end Ciré passes the test when he allows his genuine nature to show. He becomes free for the first time. He is a well-balanced man who ordinarily loves and respects all his wives and children, though he evidently admires Collé most although the only child she has with him is female. In a culture where male children are favoured over female ones, Collé's position should have made her insecure in her marriage; but this is not the case. She is Ciré's favourite wife. This presents Ciré's masculinity as different from the dominant conception. At a subconscious level Ciré desires Collé's resistance as it leads to his own liberation. Now he does not have to live the identity of his elder brother who forced him to exhibit violent masculinity. The fact that Ciré has allowed his daughter Amsatou to skip purification shows he already appreciates how dangerous the ritual is for women. What he now does is to openly support Collé. He tells Amath, 'It takes more than a pair of balls to make a man'. He spells out a paradigm shift in patriarchal authority. In this film, Sembène shows what is wrong with traditional patriarchy.

Patriarchy is not just about men, it is about persistently privileging one way of doing things, one way of being and one way of knowing. That way of knowing stems from notions about how the public space operates, based almost entirely on the way men have acted in that space (Wadud 2009:101).

Other men who suffer the cruelty of patriarchy with their female partners include Bengali, in *Finzan* who, together with Bala, follows Nanyuma as she leaves the community. It is intriguing that Sissoko makes Bala, who has the support of his patriarchal community, follow her, pathetically begging to be taken along. Bengali's joining of Nanyuma, however, is consistent with the role he plays in the film. He also feels oppressed when the community cannot allow him to marry her. For attempting to woo Nanyuma, Bengali's father orders his public humiliation by having him flogged before the elders and his peers. Like Collé in *Moolaadé*, his defiance is manifested in his resilience and refusal to cry. Close-up reaction shots show a young man wincing and almost fainting as the lashes descend on Bengali. When Bengali later pleads with Nanyuma to return to her husband's home and submit to the will of tradition, he acknowledges that the patriarchal institution is too strong for them. He leaves with Nanyuma because he shares her sentiments.

Similar to Saga in *Tilai*, in *Moolaadé*, Sembène makes Mercenaire, one of the most marginal characters, who literally lives on the margins of the community, to become the ultimate scapegoat – the saviour of those who would be 'broken' by the force of patriarchy. The film opens with his exciting entry, as an outsider, into the community. He comes in broad daylight. He is surrounded by children cheerfully welcoming him with his cart loaded with merchandise from the city. As he enters the village, he meets the women going to fetch water. The link between him and the women as people who are marginalised socially is immediately established. He is an ambiguous character in the community. He appears to be the playboy of the village and is thought of as morally perverse. He is an overtly funny character who shamelessly flirts with any young woman who comes to buy at his stall and the women playfully enjoy his harmless flirtation. His charm, really, is a strategy to sell his goods. However, under this surface Mercenaire is an advocate for social justice. His conversation with Ibrahima reveals something about this value the community knows nothing about. When Ibrahima informs him of the cancellation of his marriage to Amsatou and his father's arranged marriage to his 11-year-old cousin Filly, who is 'purified', Mercenaire challenges and accuses him and the chief of promoting paedophilia, which is criminal under the law. He explains to Ibrahima how, as part of the United Nations military peace force, he became a spokesman for junior officers who were being cheated by corrupt officials. He had to suffer the outcome of the successful protest he led, leading to the popular nickname Mercenaire. This background presents him as a mouthpiece for the defenceless and prepares the



viewer for the price he pays when he intervenes once more, this time to stop the cruelty of flogging Collé into submission. He becomes the perfect scapegoat for the elders, who feel humiliated by Collé's resilience and their failure to subjugate her. Mercenaire's exit from the community is forced; he leaves in haste and by night as young men ritualistically follow to execute him. He and Collé are the ultimate sacrificial figures in the film – Collé endures the whip to save the girls; Mercenaire stops the flogging just before Collé capitulates and he dies for this.

As the above discussions indicate, society is knotted in the patriarchal web. As the principally marginalised gender, women, more than men, express themselves against their oppression. As Johnson (2005) analyses it, although society may be aware of this gender-related unfairness, they would rather keep silent because it is easier to let things go on as they are. This is how embedded we are in patriarchy. The defence the community puts up against feminist activists as seen in this film often arises from the fear of facing the truth 'because feminism touches such a deep nerve of truth and the denial that keeps us from it' (Johnson 2005:22). The filmmakers, in the portrayal of these sensitive men, challenge those whose ideal of masculinity is still the traditional one. Aaron Kipnis (in LaFrance 2000:1) explains these two tendencies of masculinity:

Today, men doing battle in the market place have donned a new set of armor. Many powerful men have constructed a heroic personality that is hard, inflexible and like the armor of old, heavy to drag around. It is difficult to feel much pleasure of joy in life when one is burdened with a self-image that say [sic]: in order to be a man, you must be tough and cool as steel. In today's society, however, men are discovering, like their medieval counter parts, that they are no longer impervious to the armor-piercing arrows slung by people who have lost connection to their souls.

## Conclusion

In the above analysis, I have shown that patriarchy, characterised by the principles of male dominance, male identification, male-centredness and obsession with control is the hegemonic principle in both traditional and contemporary Africa as reflected in the films analysed here. Although women are particularly oppressed under this logic as the 'other', the majority of men are also victims of the system as it values power remaining esoteric and in the hands of a few men who serve it as functionaries. Its logic of rigid and hierarchical socialisation is meant to keep each gender in their place. The selected filmmakers have demonstrated great sensitivity in exposing, criticising

and taking activist stances against institutions and practices that particularly oppress women, such as female virgin sacrifice, excision, wife inheritance, bride price and related violence. Female characters are endowed with rare courage in facing what they know is an uphill challenge. Again and again, the filmmakers show that the absence of the feminine principle in the public domain, seen as moderating and balancing male hegemony, hampers the whole community. The esteem in which motherhood is held by the filmmakers seems to correspond with the stance of African feminism of the 'dual-sex' tradition that sees the operation of the two genders in Africa as complementary, not hierarchical and motherhood as a vital life force. However, although the 'mother is supreme' at many levels, African communities need to be more receptive to women who do not have biological children. This category of women are currently regarded as oddities and marginalised, as seen in the emphatic portrayal of Sana in *Yaaba*, a social reality confirmed by Clark's (2011) recent research where such women are seen as persons to be pitied and at best treated as children.

The films also show that there is growing resistance against patriarchy from both young females and males. For the young men who join forces with the resisting female characters they are involved with, the new meaning of masculinity is to have the courage to oppose cultural practices that may appear to favour males but denigrate the dignity of the woman. These young men are growing to realise that their humanity is linked to that of women and the radical challenge to patriarchy, an encompassing hegemonic culture, lies in the hands of young men like Ibrahima who are ready to announce the end of the era of tyrannical patriarchy. This hope is envisioned as possible because these are the men who will be at the helm of power tomorrow. The filmmakers' perspective of leadership continuing in the hands of men corresponds with the social reality on the African continent. The exceptional women who join this stream often do so at great sacrifice to their femininity and on the terms of patriarchy, as in the case of Queen Sarraounia. The one who sticks to her values cannot be accommodated, just like Sia is driven mad. The filmmaker's hope for a better community is embedded in the younger generation of men, who are more sensitive and have integrated 'mother values' into themselves.



## Endnotes

1. The role of the hunter in African cinema is significant as seen, for example, in Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Guimba The Tyrant* (Mali 1995) and Dani Kouyaté's *Keita The Griot Heritage* (Burkina Faso 1995). In *Guimba*, it is the hunters' fraternity that restores the community to the correct art of governance after Guimba's reign of terror. As a group endowed with special cosmic wisdom and knowledge of the occult, they keep evil in check. Similarly in *Keita*, it is the mysterious hunter who prompts the griot to take the journey to the city and transmit the oral wisdom of the past to the younger generation. The disappearance of the hunter (husband) from this intolerant patriarchal community spells a big lack in the community. The hunter has disappeared in *Wend Kuuni*. The one person who believes in his being alive – and his imminent return – is his wife, though her hope in her husband's return makes her the most marginalised person in the film and she is subsequently rejected by the community. It is significant, in my view, that Kaboré involves both husband and wife in this search for wholeness.
2. The issue of arranged marriage in patriarchy and the unhappiness that issues from it is a recurrent topic in the filmmakers' concerns as discussed in this book. Different dimensions of this concern are expressed, as seen in *Muna Moto* and *Madame Brouette*.
3. Jean-Pierre Dikongué-Pipa is a filmmaker of great repute who started his career as a stage actor and playwright. After his foundation of the *Jeunesse Artistique Club* he wrote his first feature, *Muna Moto*, which is also the first Cameroonian feature film. Before *Muna Moto*, Dikongué-Pipa made three short films, and by 1987, he had made nine other films. *Muna Moto* has been one of the most acclaimed African films, particularly for its aggressive cinematic style and commitment to denouncing deplorable traditional practices with regard to women. The film is shot in black and white, with a 16 mm hand-held camera. He represents the typical struggle of African filmmakers face in raising funds for their films. The difficult financial situation in which Dikongué-Pipa found himself did not allow him to produce the high-quality film that he wanted. He did not even have the money to pay the crew, most of whom participated through sheer commitment to produce the film and to see their own images. Besides *Muna Moto*, *Le Prix de la Liberté* (The Prize of Liberty, 1978) is another of his films that focuses on women's position in society. The protagonist in this latter film is a woman who flees her stifling, traditional society in search of liberty in the city, but ends up in yet another entrapment: prostitution. From these two films, the women question features prominently in this filmmaker's consideration. His representations show that there are still many challenges for women to attain equality within patriarchy. In spite of their struggle, his female characters do not succeed in achieving their goal.
4. In African cinema, it is common to find the most marginalised, such as 'idiots', 'madmen', slaves and those who are regarded as lowly by the mainstream, making

insightful analyses of their communities. This is seen in *Sia, le Rêve du Python* and *Moolaadé*.

5. Dani Kouyaté is a Burkinabe filmmaker with a background in theatre and cultural studies and he comes from a family of griots. The role of the griot as a communicator, historian, and guardian of tradition, musician, and sometimes community poet occupies a significant place in his filmmaking. Kouyaté sees himself essentially as a griot using the principal attribute of the griot: a storyteller that uses fantasies and metaphors to tell a story that is full of lessons. He sees cinema as a fabulous tool with which to perform as a griot, using a different medium of expression and at times subverting the role of the traditional griot. His first feature film, *Keita, L'Héritage du Griot* (1995), is a celebration of the educative role the griot played in traditional community, a value that is quickly disappearing and is neglected in the modern educational curriculum. The griot is featured in his second film, *Sia le Rêve du Python*, which is an adaptation of the play, *La Légende du Wagadu Vue par Sia Yatabere*, by the Mauritanian playwright, Moussa Diagona.
6. This storyline of the sacrifice of beautiful virgins in exchange for prosperity is a recurring theme in the representation of women from this part of Africa, often hit by natural disasters such as drought. Moustapha Alassane, the filmmaker from Niger, captures a similar theme in *Toula ou le Génie des Eaux* (1974), where in exchange for rain, a beautiful virgin is offered to the water snake. This is also a story based on a Fulani myth, and the director retells it to reflect a contemporary political situation.
7. Wakhane's psychological state is comparable to Okonkwo's in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. He had to do what he did because he was driven by the patriarchal script of male courage, but somehow, both are aware that they should not have done what they did. This was masculinity performance pushed to the extreme.
8. 'Guelwaar' is a significant Wolof term that requires explication. Simply translated, it means a man of noble lineage. Guelwaar is a real historical personage, a descendant of a real family who reigned in the Sine Salum, from Senegal in the mid-15th century up to 1960. To call a person guelwaar refers to his nobility of character, one who fights injustice, one who is full of love for people, who has a sense of honour and who does not renounce his ideals even at the cost of his life. A guelwaar is attached to those values which have been transmitted through culture and upbringing. A guelwaar should be exalted in his way of thinking, behaving.
9. The original text in Italian: *tre volti di un'africa indecisa che ora si vende, ora s'arrende, ora dimentica le proprie origini; un'africa zoppa, prostituta, emigranta e alla disperata ricerca di se stessa*.
10. *Guimba* is a film where Sissoko attacks and ridicules tyrannical leadership. Although Guimba is introduced by the narrator as mightier than a lion, an indomitable man, feared by all, the film humorously reveals how he is resisted on all sides because he is incapable of leadership. None of the orders he gives are carried out effectively.



The more daring of his resisters are, paradoxically, from the 'weaker' social groups – women and slaves for whom he has no respect. There is nothing about Guimba or his son that inspire respect as their moral weaknesses are the talk of the townsfolk. Through humour, Sissoko advocates the resistance to forms of tyranny, in the domestic and public spheres.

11. Cissé's *Yeelen*, a mythic film that portrays the conflict between father and son and different paradigms of leadership are analysed in Chapter 4.



# 4

## Positioning the elderly in gender relations

### Introduction

Old age is regarded with the utmost respect in the traditional African value system. The aged are considered repositories of wisdom as they are commonly associated with experience and sagacity. The aged remain part of mainstream society as they fulfil the important functions of transmitting values and guiding society. Therefore, they are often given particular attention and affection from family members, especially the young. They are viewed as the link between the past and the present, the living and the dead. They, in turn, show benevolence and affection toward the younger members of society. According to Mabenga (2000:310):

Old age is a state of earthly blessedness. It is true that an old person suffers. However, he does not live his suffering in desperation nor is he abandoned. Traditional culture ... has given aged people a role and a virtue that make them genuine protagonists in community life until their deaths<sup>1</sup> [my translation from Italian].

In the previous chapter I focused on how young women (and men) are positioned in patriarchal, hierarchical gender relations; how they often contest the oppressive rule of the father figure and how they are, in turn, severely punished for their resistance. However, their spirit of resistance remains unconquered. As the elderly attract respect in Africa, I now focus on the portrayal of elderly women as centres of authority in film.

In 'Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence' Bakare-Yusuf (2003) identifies two main debates in African feminism: 'women and patriarchy', which considers hierarchical patriarchy as the biggest obstacle to gender equality and the fair treatment of women in society, and 'dual sex roles', in which the roles of women and men complement each other without the



inclusion of a gender hierarchy. The two genders each have their own specific roles and motherhood is foregrounded as a unique role, specific to women. 'Motherism' views women as mothers and sees motherhood as a core value of African femininity. Acholonu (1995:3), who is responsible for this coinage, explains that this Afrocentric feminist theory is:

Anchored [in] the matrix of motherhood which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature (especially women's writing), African culture, African psychology, oral traditions, and empirical philosophy. Africa's alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood.

She further explains that a motherist includes both men and women who respect and accommodate the motherly values of love, tolerance, giving service and valuing cooperation between the sexes. In this respect a male artist who creates his work from a motherist and non-patriarchal perspective is as much of an advocate of motherism as a female artist. Acholonu expands the African woman's role of 'spiritual motherhood' to reach beyond the expanse of the continent to include the entire human race. The representation of the mother as a 'saviour' who intervenes to clean up and correct the mess the violence of male power has created can be seen in the portrayal of elderly women in the films discussed in this chapter. These filmmakers call attention to the desire to go back to the abandoned ethics of motherhood that seemed to govern society in the idyllic era of the past. The redeeming selflessness of motherhood or the female principle seems akin to what Vaughan (2002) theorises in her explanation of the difference between the feminine principle, which is centred in motherhood and characterised by 'gift giving', and the opposing patriarchal-capitalist principle of exchange as discussed in Chapter 3. Western feminists like Vaughan and Hierro (1994) agree with African feminists that motherhood is central to feminist theorising.

Oyewumi's (1997) theorising builds on that of Acholonu when she contests the idea that the Eurocentric and/or Americanised production of knowledge can be uncritically applied for understanding human behaviour and cultures in the rest of the world. The concept of gender as the reason for women's subordination in the West, for instance, cannot be applied unilaterally to explain and define the experiences of women worldwide since gender is a culture-specific construct. In Oyewumi's view, the gender hierarchy which favours the male as the organising



principle in society is a European phenomenon which is oddly fitted to African epistemology where the organising principle is seniority rather than gender. Using the experience of the Yoruba of Nigeria, Oyewumi argues (like Acholonu) that the female identity that is central to African femininity is motherhood. From a gendered perspective, a woman is always portrayed as subordinate to a man in a clearly demarcated space within the domestic sphere, but this, she argues, is not the case with the Yoruba. On the other hand, viewing a woman as a mother figure places her squarely within the family in a Trinitarian relationship with father and child – a relationship where hierarchies are blurred and give way to specificities. Commenting on the oddity of the term ‘single motherhood’, she contends:

From an African perspective and as a matter of fact, mothers by definition cannot be single. In most cultures, motherhood is defined as a relationship to progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man. Within the feminist literature, motherhood, which in many other societies constitutes the dominant identity of women, is subsumed under wifehood. Because woman is a synonym for wife, procreation and lactation in the gender literature (traditional and feminist) are usually presented as part of the sexual division of labour. Marital coupling is thus constituted as the base of societal division of labour (Oyewumi 2004:5).

Her argument is that power centres are diffused in the family as not all power is centred in the man. The mother is a centre of alternative power in communities like the Yoruba, which she defines as non-gendered. Here categories are differentiated on the basis of seniority or the lineage system (also see Sudarkasa 1996). The only clearly defined role, in Yoruba culture, is that of the mother because of the singularity and uniqueness of her role. This is a privileged position that transcends all other social roles. She explains:

Because of the matrifocality of many African family systems, the mother is the pivot around which familial relationships are delineated and organised. Consequently, *omoya* [children of one mother or womb-sibling] is the comparable category in Yoruba culture to the nuclear sister in white American culture. The relationship among womb-siblings, like that of sisters in a nuclear family, is based on an understanding of common interests and borne out of a shared experience. The defining shared experience that binds *omoya* in loyalty and unconditional love is the mother’s womb. Therefore, the category ‘*omoya*’, unlike ‘sister’, transcends gender (Oyewumi 2004:6).

Although theorists like Acholonu, Sudarkasa and Oyewumi convincingly move away from gender hierarchies on the basis of their specific communities, the force of patriarchy cannot be ignored even in the communities these mother-centric

theorists discuss. Aidoo and Ogunjipe-Leslie draw attention to issues of gender and the governing patriarchal logic in African societies. I believe Oyewumi's reference to honorary male titles and the patriarchal status given to women implies embedded hierarchical patriarchal gender logic. Oyewumi's emphasis on motherhood hides the sinister marginality and oppression of a woman who does not beget children. Eradicating gender from examining women in Africa is altogether problematic. Both strands of African feminism are therefore relevant and applicable in theorising on different categories of African women.

However, the dominant aspect in mother-centric theory, besides challenging universalism, is that the 'mother' is a centre of alternative authority which differs from patriarchal authority. In the films analysed in this chapter, I draw attention to the filmmakers' search for the rediscovery of the mother or feminine principle that is seen as society's redemptive force. This value is particularly brought forward in the representation of elderly women as archetypal symbols of motherhood and sagacity. There is a distinct difference between the portrayals of the 'mother' and the young female I discuss in Chapter 3. Even where their roles are not central to plot development, what elderly women do or say carry particular weight in these films.

## Elderly women as centres of alternative authority

Leadership and governance, both in the domestic and public spheres, are central concerns in African cinema. The fact that African filmmakers like Sembène (in *Xala* and *Guelwaar*), Sissoko (especially in *Guimba*), and Cissé (in most of his films)<sup>2</sup> often return to this theme indicates its topicality. I use Cissé's *Yeelen* (Mali 1987) to discuss the significant issue of power in African cinema. In this film, Cissé makes a change from his earlier films by adopting a mythic style to explore the subject of leadership and good governance in Mali. He uses the familiar Komo metaphor to address the endemic issue of leadership as a universal phenomenon. The need to rid government of corruption and restore it to the integrity of ethical leadership is relevant for all communities (MacRae 1999:128). Cissé uses the ancient rite of initiation and the transmission of the secret power wielded by blacksmiths of the Komo cult to address this challenge. He employs the discourse of the traditions of the past to interrogate the present and signify a more hopeful future. He shows that the solutions to Africa's problems do not have to come from 'outside', but can be found by revisiting the paradigms of traditional leadership and authority. In his paper on masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Okafor's (2010:154) comment that



among the Ibo, only men who have taken titles exercise authority indicates the seriousness with which traditional African communities regard governance. In *Yeelen* the men of the Komo cult have a sacred duty not to abuse power. When the balance of power is maintained, masculine and the feminine agencies are perfectly blended. The collective nature of traditional authority, either in the form of men holding titles or as members of secret cults like the Komo, was meant to act as a check on individual waywardness and the human desire to dominate. Therefore *Yeelen* is Janus-faced; it looks to the past while pointing the way to the future. Cissé gives the reason for his change in style as

tension [was] building around me because of my previous films, and it was clear that if I wanted to stay in my country and enjoy a degree of freedom of expression, I had to lighten things a bit, or to make a different type of cinema (Diawara 1988:13).

Because most African artists operate within dictatorial regimes, they constantly have to negotiate spaces where they can be authentic artists without the risk of losing their freedom of expression.

The mythical style Cissé uses makes *Yeelen* a film that is at once situated in the immediate power myth of the Bambara and the general truth about power. Although Cissé employs highly coded and cryptic cultural symbols, the central plot of the conflict between father and son over power follows a simple classical structure. Soma Diarra, the father of Nianankoro the protagonist, belongs to the Komo fraternity which is invested with mystical, occult powers that are supposed to be used with restraint and for the good of the community. However, for many seasons this authority has been abused by the Komo members. Soma Diarra's conduct embodies this power abuse. His family becomes the immediate victim of his cruelty. From the time his son is born he sets out to kill him because he sees in him one who would grow up to challenge his abuse of authority. The film is set in the context of abrasive masculinity dramatised by an insecure father who sees his end in the birth of a son who is closely connected to his mother. Soma Diarra represents power that has lost balance because it has no regard for the female agency represented in the film by the mother who symbolically looks much older than the father, making it easy for the viewer to see her as an archetypal symbol of wisdom. The hostility the father feels towards mother and child sends the two into exile. The mother takes the 'eye' of the wooden wing of the *Kore* – the most important element of the scattered power symbols of the Komo – that represents vision and foresight with her into exile.

Cissé explains the significance of the key symbols in this culturally coded film in the opening credits. The Komo cult has the traditional responsibility of

administering the cosmic power of the *Kore*. The members of the Komo are gifted with supernatural and occult knowledge. The seventh and highest stage of this knowledge is the *Kore*, which is symbolised by the wooden wing in the film. When this power is exercised correctly, it is meant to harmonise the occult and the material world, the physical and the spiritual, so that nature and humans live in harmony. This knowledge can also be used manipulatively – which brings disharmony and conflict. The proper knowledge and exercise of the *Kore* to check the abuse of power is what Nianankoro seeks in the film. Part of the abuse of this power is seen in the dismemberment of the *Kore*. Significantly, the scattered parts are in the custody of peripheral members of the community living in exile – Nianankoro’s mother and his uncle, Djigui. The protagonist’s task is to bring the scattered pieces of the *Kore* together so that harmony and good governance may be restored to the community.

The film opens when Nianankoro, the boy child brought up by his mother, has just come of age. Mother and son have been fleeing from the father for ten years. As a young Bambara who must be true to his masculine identity, and as brave as ready to face up to challenges, he tells his mother it is becoming inevitable that he will face his father since he is only a few villages away and will catch up with them anyway. Seeing her son’s determination to resolve the conflict in an abrasive manner, the mother warns him of the dangers of such an approach and advises him to seek help before he can face the father.<sup>3</sup> The initial dialogue between mother and son portrays the differences between his masculine and feminine approaches to the same problem:



- Mother: Son, your father is a terror. You don't know him, but I do. No one can withstand his magic poison. I know him. You are different. I braved fearsome forests, humiliated myself to save you. But I'm worried.
- Nianankoro: Mother. Let's stop this talk! I'm a man, now. I'll deal with it.
- Mother: [Laughs in mockery] You make me laugh. You can't vie with your father. He is a terror. You'd be preparing your own shroud. In one stroke, he'd burn you to ashes. He's a terror. Enough talk! Let's go. Let's leave this land.
- Nianankoro: Mother, I can't run away.
- Mother: Don't say that. A mother wants her son to be happy. Let's go. We've suffered enough.



*Yeelen 1: Exiled mother and son.*

The mother edges her son away from a violent head-on collision with his father that would lead to meaningless destruction. She instructs him, arms him with a protective amulet and sends him on a mission to find his uncle Djigui, his father's twin brother. Djigui will aid Nianankoro in the task of encountering his father as Djigui has the wooden wing of the *Kore* symbol of power. Djigui will give Nianankoro the final instructions and equipment to face up to his father. Nianankoro's mother tells him that he is different from his father. The viewer sees the difference in the sensitivity he shows when he realises he has

inadvertently offended his mother by impudently asking her why she ever married his father as he is such a terror. His repeated requests for apology for the offensive question as well as his submission to her guidance shows he is a young man ready to take a different path than his father. Following his mother's advice, he no longer speaks of his masculine power to 'deal with his father', but humbly says, 'Mother, I rely on your wisdom. What must I do now?' It is only at this point that his mother reaffirms her commitment to guide him. The journey Nianankoro takes is a dramatisation of the feminine approach to the use of authority. It is a long way that depends on relationships and seeks for everyone's help and contributions. As the mother sends her son on a journey, she herself goes to the land of the Mande to look for a powerful magician so that father and son may be reconciled. The mother-centred consciousness represented in this film reaches out to the larger community to mobilise the human resources to defeat oppressive patriarchy. This reading of the feminine principle coheres with Marima's (2011:246) analysis of the configuration of femininity in Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera's literary works where motherhood is foregrounded as a dynamic force that reaches out to help as a method of struggle against gender violence. The collaborative approach of Nianankoro's mother coheres with the principles of African feminism that are committed to challenging oppression and calling up the collective responsibility of both genders (Blay 2008:70). She introduces her son to a network of relationships to complete his formation into an intelligent and sensitive young man, and Nianankoro allows his masculinity to be tempered by his mother to effectively complete his mission. Aidoo highlights the centrality of female agency, working hand-in-hand with the man in ushering in the needed regenerative energy for the society when she says:

Every woman and every man should be feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer (Aidoo 1998:47).

The wealth of knowledge the mother – custodian of the community's wisdom – transmits to her son is the first stage of beginning the long process of re-establishing good governance. She has the 'eye' of the *Kore* that she hands over to Nianankoro to take to Djigui. The protagonist's ensuing journey tests and develops his knowledge, stamina and restraint in the use of power. In this journey, he traverses the entire country and interacts with various peoples such



as the Peul (Fulani) and the Dogon, who represent the major ethnicities in Mali. The mother spends ten years in exile and makes many sacrifices to protect her son to garner the necessary support to bring the two ethnicities together as it should be. She tells her son, 'I'd be the happiest of mothers' when this end is achieved. The mother who sends her son on this journey to reunify the *Kore* parts is portrayed as the intelligence behind the son's actions. This significant background role she plays is consistent with the key roles of mothers of epic heroes such as Sundiata (Konate 2010:203) and Chaka (Gikandi 2010:297), even though griots and storytellers often do not accentuate their centrality in making heroes. As a silent and background mediator, Nianankoro's mother is instrumental in re-invoking the morality of leadership, which has lost its edge because of the abuse of power.

The mother's approach, which has no room for shortcuts, endeavours to inculcate alternative values in her son. When she advises Nianankoro not to use a confrontational approach towards his father, in a community where dominant masculinity places high premium on the show of power and aggressiveness, this may appear like emasculating her son. As seen in Konate's (2010:206–207) analysis of virility and emasculation in Ahmadou Kourouma's novels, the mother in *Yeelen* is seen as an alternative source of authority to the father. Nianankoro's body language and posture as he submits to his mother's wisdom shows Cissé wants viewers to perceive the negotiating and non-confrontational authority of the mother as superior to the confrontational style of the father. Nianankoro becomes his mother's child in the sense that the values of his mother are embedded in him and he transmits this in his relationships with others. In a way, he is an extension of his mother.

The opportunity to exercise this alternative authority, learned from the mother, comes when Nianankoro is arrested by the Peul as a cattle thief during his tedious journey. As one gifted in the power of the occult he could have used his power to show off or to humiliate those who have wrongfully treated him as a thief, but he does not. Nianankoro instead uses his power to help the Peul king who has been defeated and humiliated by his enemies on several occasions. This is alternative masculinity where a man with power is mishandled by an 'effeminate' group of warriors, but he maintains restraint until it is necessary to use his power in self-defence, without causing harm to others. Cissé dramatises the governing patriarchal and masculine principle of violence, conquest and domination when Nianankoro arrives at the Peul kingdom. By the community's standards, the Peul are a 'weak' people, often

defeated in ethnic battles and despised as ‘effeminate’. Since physical, violent strength is the only yardstick for measuring a community’s worth, the king who is impressed by Nianankoro’s magical powers tries to persuade him to remain in his kingdom after helping them defeat their enemy.<sup>4</sup> However, the incorruptible Nianankoro is guided by his mission to find the dismembered parts of the *Kore*. Before he leaves, the king gives him a delicate task – to cure his youngest wife, Attou, of barrenness. Nianankoro achieves this feat, but in the process impregnates the queen himself. In what looks to be his downfall, the king disgracefully banishes both Attou and Nianankoro from the palace for their unethical conduct. Nianankoro takes the Peul woman as his wife and proceeds to the land of the Dogon. What is evident from the encounter with the Peul king is the different face of masculinity Nianankoro represents. The king’s non-aggressive, non-violent version of masculinity makes him an inadvertent partner in Nianankoro’s mission of renewing the community. This king’s closeness to the feminine principle is reinforced by dominant masculinity’s consideration of him as ‘effeminate’. Indeed, he is unable to make his young wife pregnant. In the eye of patriarchal society, he is a humiliated man – a fact that makes him feel vulnerable among ‘men’ (on virility see Bukenya 2010; Downing 2010; Hale 2010; Horne 2010; Konate 2010; Loum 2010; Odinga 2011). This humiliation notwithstanding, Cissé makes the Peul king emerge as respectable because he uses his power with moderation and he does not humiliate the already fallen with harsher punishments. His response to Nianankoro’s betrayal of trust is the best that could possibly be: to give him Attou, his wife who has now been cured of barrenness, instead of killing Nianankoro even when the latter confesses that this is what he deserves. The value of humility in the exercise of power is seen in ‘powerful’ Nianankoro’s confession of vulnerability that makes him fall a ‘happy one’ because it leads to the birth of the predestined child. This is a fall that humbles him into realising that no human being needs to gloat over the other, because we are all marked by the same frailties. Both Nianankoro and the Peul king share vulnerabilities and help each other on different occasions and are thus dependent on one another as opposed to the dominant patriarchs, Biafing and Diarra, who are governed by the principle of domination, subjugation and the humiliation of the ‘weak’. In my reading, the relationship between the Peul king and Nianankoro is characterised by respect, restraint in use of power, recognition of human frailty and the protection of the other from shame represents the ideal (but presently despised by brute patriarchy) principle that needs to be activated. I find it significant that Nianankoro’s son will be born of



a Peul mother – a people perceived as effeminate from the perspective of the dominant masculinity.



*Yeelen 2: Ridiculing the weak Peul king.*

*Yeelen* is rife with symbols that speak to the particular and the universal. These symbols are often presented in their binary relationships (Diawara 1992:161). At times, in the binary is embedded the complementarity of the masculine and feminine dimensions in the balance of power that is needed between male and female agencies in community (Amadiume 1998; Oyewumi 2005; Okafor 2010:149). The binary values, male and female, are indeed dependent variables that define each other for one is useless without the other. It is more a relationship of balance than opposition (Mak & Waaldijk 2009:213). Frenetic masculinity as represented by Soma Diarra has to be refereed by the mother to give rise to the alternative masculinity practiced by Nianankoro who has learned this careful balancing act from his mother in the absence of a father in his upbringing. Implied in this narrative is the fact that where the mother/femininity is repressed, the father/masculinity turns abusive. Von Werlhof's (2005) argument that the operations of harsh patriarchy cancel and destroy the feminine principles of society seems to be reflected in the antagonistic relationship between the mother and the father in this film. She explains that patriarchy's desire to dominate through violence and to exist as an oppositional force is due to its having usurped the matriarchal order of society. It establishes itself by minimising and pushing to the margin the feminine principle, presenting itself as the original social order and establishing institutions to keep the status quo. The creation of the female principle in *Yeelen* draws attention to and awakens the alternative matriarchal centre of power that is ever-present, though it may be overwhelmed by patriarchy. This alternative principle, characterised by the horizontal relationship of cooperation, sharing and equality without

domination, is what Nianankoro's mother represents. To put it in Von Werlhof's (2005) words:

Such matriarchal view on inter-connectedness does not transcend this world nor create another world beyond it, but it goes right through it (*transcendere*) without disconnecting the individual beings. On the contrary, it is transcending their limits and sees every being connected with every other. Thus, the thoughts pick up the threads of ancient wisdom woven by matriarchal cultures.

This is how things were originally meant to be. Diawara (1992:160), who categorises *Yeelen* among the 'return to source' cluster of African cinema, states that Cissé, in this film, is on a search for precolonial African traditions that can contribute to the solution of contemporary problems. In going to the ancient past of the Bambara cosmology to find the traditional wisdom of governance, Cissé's search takes him to the traditional matriarchal culture to rediscover the balanced art of governance, founded on the feminine principle of sharing, togetherness and connectedness.

In Nianankoro, who is the transition to the threshold of a new era of governance, is integrated the balanced feminine and the masculine principles. He is also a bridge between the two visionaries: the mother who is in possession of the 'eye' of the *Kore* and Djigui who has the wing of the *Kore* and foretells the future. In the two, the positives of the masculine and the feminine are combined to bring about wholesome change. Nianankoro's journey then is like a pilgrimage through which he attains the ultimate knowledge of the correct exercise of power. He purifies and energises himself at the spring before he can listen to the prophetic words of Djigui and focuses on what he is expected to do to take the community to the threshold of change and the rebirth of goodness. To Djigui, the appearance of Nianankoro is like a Nunc Dimittis.<sup>5</sup> Now that he has seen Nianankoro, he can die in peace because there is hope for the future. Nianankoro is the person to whom he can reveal the secrets of the Komo and the *Kore*, and therefore the balanced art of governance so desperately needed by this community that has been dismembered over the years.

In the ultimate battle between the *Kore*, the seventh and highest stage of knowledge in the Komo (wielded by the son), and the magic pestle that the father uses to search for Nianankoro, who is accused of having stolen an ancestral fetish, both father and son are consumed by the powerful light of the 'eye' of the *Kore*. The entire land smoulders long before Attou and her son emerge from the embers into a landscape still surrounded by signs of destruction. Attou transitionally wears Nianankoro's robe in the symbolic desert setting



that becomes the place of transference of power and a new beginning. It is the mother who teaches the child to realise his role in this new era. To quote Stefanson's (2009:200) paraphrase of Cissé:

*Yeelen* is at once a farewell to the cruelty of myth and the starting point of Bambara history, of people surviving centuries of tribulations. So although Nianankoro is the victim of his demented father, he is also the victim of the sacrifice that will induce a 'new humanity'.

The natural desire of a father to initiate his son into continuing his heritage does not exist in the relationship between Soma Diarra and his son.<sup>6</sup> Instead, his father desires to kill him as soon as he learns of Nianankoro's birth. This makes the violent confrontation at the end inevitable. Negotiation and reconciliation are possible if both parties are committed to them. The son's imperative vocation is to curb his father's tyranny in order to end this bizarre relationship. The mother affirms this call in her initial conversation with her son at the beginning of the film.



*Yeelen 3: A mother's sacrifice for the safety of her son.*



*Yeelen 4: A father's prayer to find the son for destruction.*

Dialectical binary opposition is evident in Bambara cosmology, as represented in *Yeelen*. The identical twins, Djigui and Soma, are portrayed as different sides of the same coin. Soma Diarra represents the all-powerful, exclusively masculine dimension, while Djigui articulates relational, feminine ethics and like Nianankoro and his mother, he lives in exile. He finds the power structure of his society too stifling and too intolerant to minority voices. In the only conversation he has with Nianankoro, Djigui explains the event that lead to his blindness and separation from his twin brother. Irked that the mystery of the Komo is owned and controlled by only a few men, Djigui asked his father to make this wisdom freely available so that all may benefit from it. This request annoyed his father who brandished the light that comes from the wooden

emblem of the *Kore* in Djigui's face and blinded him. He says in the film, 'From the wing of the *Kore* springs such energy that its splendour overwhelmed me. I no longer saw that the darkness has so much left the country blind' (see MacRae 1999a:137). Although it is not explained in the film how Nianankoro's mother and Djigui came to take custody of the most important symbols of the Komo (the wooden wing and the eye of the *Kore*), it is significant to note that they are marginalised – exiled – members of the community. Djigui's father's tyrannical authority does not accept challenges or alternative views. To ensure that this pattern of rule continues, the Komo cult only initiates sons who will become like their fathers. Djigui, though a twin brother to Soma Diarra, develops a different awareness of the injustices in their society. He notices the darkness in which society is enveloped. For this, his father blinds him in his wrath and exiles him so that he can neither see nor speak about the situation. However, paradoxically, he remains a visionary – a symbol of the incorruptible artist whose prophetic role cannot be curtailed by the intolerance of the hegemony. Djigui develops a prophetic vision and voice to continue his visionary vocation.<sup>7</sup> The similarities and differences between the twin brothers who represent different values, point to the feminine and masculine sides of a person. The two sides have to be balanced since men and women each have a bit of the other sex in themselves (Agacinski 1998:16; Dipio 2010:110). It is thus significant that Djigui initiates Nianankoro to the mystery of the *Kore* in the presence of Attou, his wife, who is also included in the narrative to play a 'mother' role. Djigui presents the wisdom of power as something to be shared. This transparent initiation is what Soma Diarra could not do for his legitimate son. The narrative resolution of the film shows that no harmony is possible as long as the component parts exist as separate entities: feminine and masculine principles.

The inevitable separation of the twins who differ in their principles leads to the progression and reconstruction of the community. The connection between Djigui and the mother of Nianankoro, as persons who know the formula for tackling the tyranny of the father (Soma Diarra) is noteworthy. Both are in possession of elusive knowledge symbolised by the dismembered parts of the *Kore* in their possession. In the struggle against his father, the help Nianankoro receives from the various ethnic groups, through his journey, is instrumental to his success. Bringing about the unity of the *Kore* is a metaphor for the desire for national unity to defeat oppressive and sectarian leadership. The values of motherhood are crucial in this search. To reinforce this point, MacRae (1999:137) clarifies:



In *Yeelen*, Cissé uses the ancient heritage metaphorically to imply that Malians of all ethnic groups can discover unity as stewards of the *Kore*, exercise its power for the benefit of all, and ponder the eventual retribution for violating this sacred trust.

This is a moment of experimentation with traditional models. As Djigui commissions Nianankoro, armed with the assembled instruments of power, he tells him, ‘Take the *Kore* of your fathers; you will see how it will work’. This is a herculean task of ‘remembering’ his community so that it can once again experience wholeness (wa Thiong’o 2009). Nianankoro goes in faith, using ancestral powers in a changed context. The application of traditional wisdom is not a panacea to contemporary challenges. It can only be experimented within Africa’s search for solutions in contemporary society.

## Male-female dynamics

Cissé draws attention to the feminine principle in society which is often silent and unnoticed, yet holds various elements together. What is dramatically noticeable is the absence of women in the now-degenerate Komo membership. The cult members are not merely men, but men who jealously guard the secrets of power to ensure that no one with a different vision has access to it. The tenet not to share this knowledge comes from their awareness of having perverted it. It is no longer used in the interests of the entire community, but by the few who control and manipulate the rest of the community. The feminine principle of power sharing and negotiation are, however, still used by those considered ‘weak’ like Djigui and the Peul king. Cissé suggests that the feminine principle holds supremacy. This view is similarly expressed by writers like Kourouma (Konate 2010:206–207) and Gallimore (2010:50–65) in her analysis of the folktales of the Banyarwanda, who see the mother as a pillar of authority that dominant masculinity suppresses to assert itself. This, the writers indicate, is to the detriment of society. The words of Tarak Ben Ammar, a film director from Tunisia, make this implied sentiment of the filmmaker explicit when he comments on the absence of women in Tunisian public life and how this adversely affects the development of the society:

Evolution is not possible without women. This is especially true of the Arab world. The Arab man has given all he can, and his achievements aren’t great. Maybe the Arab woman can re-invent the world. A lot is expected of her by some. Me, for one. When I look at my mother I see that her intelligence is intact. She hasn’t the chance to use it (Ben Ammar in Ashbury, Helsby and O’Brien 1998: film clip 9).



*Yeelen 5: Men's way of resolving conflicts.*



*Yeelen 6: Male exclusive komo members.*

He observes, namely, that without gender balance, democratic governance will be late in coming (Lewis 2008:167). Currently the global situation of women's representation in decision-making bodies has improved because of the introduction of quotas to boost their numbers, regardless of the degree of democracy in a particular country. This form of affirmative action has helped women overcome especially cultural and economic obstacles that would have made it more difficult for them to ascend to such positions. Although improved representation does not necessarily result in a greater impact, this is a starting point (Davidson-Schmich 2006; Tripp & Kang 2008). Globally, there is marked improvement in the promotion of women's education, health care and human rights, though greater inclusion into the political arena has to largely come through the quota system. The reasons for this range from structural, institutional to cultural reasons and, of these, culture appears to be the most significant contributor to women's participation or lack of it in public political life (Norris & Inglehart 2001). In their research into post-industrial and post-communist societies, Norris and Inglehart found that countries that have had a longer history of women's involvement in public life demonstrate a more positive attitude towards women as leaders than those that have not had such exposure to women leaders. There is gradual growth towards a positive attitude for equality between the genders, especially among the younger generation. As cultural attitudes towards the genders change more rapidly in post-industrial societies, the hope for mainstreaming women increases.

Vaughan (2000) and Von Werlhof (2005) share the view that the original ethic of humanity is the feminine/mother principle, characterised by unilateral gift giving and sharing. According to Vaughan this code has, over the years, been overtaken by the patriarchal/capitalist exchange mode characterised by profit, gain, self-interest and reciprocity, and it has made the gift principle of 'communication' (giving-gift-together, Vaughan's usage) seem out of place in



our competitive society that operates on the patriarchal capitalist paradigm. The feminine principle, built on the nurturing attribute of motherhood, is pure gift giving without the expectation of reciprocity just like in the often sacrificial relationship between mother and child. In *Yeelen*, this gift principle is evident in the relationship between Nianankoro and his mother. All her life, she has made sacrifices and been humiliated not only to protect the son from the ‘deadly’ intention of the father, but also because she is committed to working towards a ‘democratic’ regime characterised by the principle of sharing and ‘togetherness’. She does not expect anything in return for her sacrifices other than the establishment of good governance for the entire community. Nianankoro is the immediate outcome of this ‘new’ masculinity based on feminine ethics. He, in turn, expands this gift principle when he offers his life as a sacrifice to bring about the good governance that he, like his mother, will not individually benefit from. In his connection with his mother, he is part of the long line of gift givers, and ‘communicators’, who now ‘takes his turn’ to live the ethics he learned from his mother. Vaughan’s (2000) faith in the feminine principle is what I read in Cissé’s portrayal of the mother figures in *Yeelen*. Although this feminine principle is presently overwhelmed by patriarchy, it is nonetheless indestructible and ever-enduring because it conforms to nature. Once society ‘hits the wall’ in its misrule, it turns back to recuperate this principle to salvage humanity just as this filmmaker does in this film (Vaughan 2000). Von Werlhof’s (2005) reference to patriarchy as ‘squatting’ on matriarchy in order to establish itself does not only point to its illegitimacy and fear-inspired violence, but also to what is wrong with a system that exists only by suppressing the other and not allowing alternatives to exist.

The two women who feature prominently in this film play the exclusive role of mothers: Nianankoro’s mother, the archetype of motherhood who is not even given a name, and Attou, his wife. The women’s, especially Nianankoro’s mother’s, approach to the issue of power is remarkably different to that of men. Power sharing is what links Nianankoro’s mother to Djigui. Even if in most of the narrative she is in the background, she supports Nianankoro with prayers and sacrifices to ensure his protection and success in his mission. She stands waist-deep in a swamp and washes herself with calabashes of precious milk as she pleads for his cause. Cissé communicates this relationship between the mother’s sacrifice and the son’s success through parallel editing. As she offers her sacrificial prayer to the water goddess, mother of all mothers, the Fulani herdsmen chase Nianankoro as a cattle thief. This apparently unfortunate situation soon works to his advantage.

Drawing from the memory of Bambara mythology, Cissé affirms the traditional role of women in balancing and regulating male power. Women as mothers and nurturers are portrayed as bringing society to the threshold of hope and to a new dawn, though they rather remain ‘invisible’ protagonists who give birth to the actual protagonists, male children, who lead the community to change. Both women in the film feature as mothers who bring up sons in the absence of their fathers – sons who are ‘different’ and have public missions to accomplish. The director makes both women epitomes of virtue. Nianankoro’s mother is a model of maternal love. When Attou becomes a mother, she assumes a similar position. Like the mother who is the custodian of the ‘eye’ of the *Kore*, Attou is also the guardian of the most important secret of the community. After the death of Nianankoro she becomes the first teacher of her son. Nianankoro leaves instructions to her to transmit to his unborn son. She nurtures their son to grow to realise his predestined mission, just as Nianankoro’s mother did before her. As underlined by Oyewumi (2005) in her analysis of gender in Yoruba cosmology, Cissé also portrays motherhood as the highest organising principle of balanced social relations (Nzegwu 2011). Cissé is recreating the community based on the traditional model and his basic point of departure is with the mother values characterised by responding to need and connectedness. This relational feminine approach contrasts with the masculine confrontational drive that Nianankoro starts with before taking the long and humbling journey of learning. Chodorow (1997:196) describes this principle as a result of socialisation when she comments about the difference between the way men and women perceive the world as a result of women growing ‘up with the relational capacities and need’ because they are involved in nurturing and caring for others. Men, on the other hand, tend to be poor in relational capacities because their gender roles put them outside familial work and parenting. However, men can also learn to embrace the female principle as Nianankoro does, because it coheres with nature.

The mother’s role in this film about the conflict between father and son over power is to activate the feminine dimension that has been pushed aside in governance, although it is still practiced by the ‘peripheral’ persons in the community like Djigui, the Peul king and the priests who guard the sacred Bongo spring. These men are willing to share their knowledge with others and to show their vulnerabilities as fellow humans (MacRae 1999:136). In the film, the men who have too much power do not know how to communicate with people. They show off power rather than initiate relationships to resolve conflicts. These men



also lack humility and the paradoxical power that goes with it (Manz 2005:53). The manner in which Nianankoro submits to die as a willing scapegoat for the return of goodness demonstrates that the evil in society is too great to be expunged by the sacrifice of a chicken, or even a goat as shown at the beginning of the film. He offers himself as a gift for the community's redemption (Stefanson 2009:198). As the two men stand facing each other in this inevitable clash, Cissé edits in a disembodied voice that expresses disappointment that the house of Diarra, entrusted with the responsibility of exercising authority, has abused it with impunity. Therefore, this privilege is to be taken away from Diarra. This voice can be associated with the poetic justice that ultimately brings misrule to an end. Nianankoro remains part of the present society though he stands against the oppressive ethics of the house of Diarra (Diawara 1992:161).<sup>8</sup> He is an instrument to bring about a prosperous future era which belongs to the generation of his son, still in his mother's womb. The role of the present era, where two generations of mothers play central roles in grooming their sons for office, is to prepare the ground for good governance in future.



*Yeelen 7: Woman as a part of the new era.*



*Yeelen 8: Nianankoro leaving his gown to be passed on to his unborn son.*



*Yeelen 9: Light consuming the darkness of the past, creating the new.*



*Yeelen 10: The mother reclaims the past to be passed to the new generation.*



*Yeelen 11: Transfer of power from mother to son.*

The ritualistic sequence that ends the narrative reminds the viewer of the beginning of the film when the mother sends Nianankoro on his search. This final sequence, which uses both long-shots and long-takes, is silent except for the background music that is sparingly used in this film. Attou emerges from the embers of the still-smouldering land. She wears her husband's robe and uses a walking stick for support. Time has passed, but the effect of the land's devastation is still present. She stands and looks ahead, to the wasteland – a stretch of semi-desert – before her. The landscape has also changed to underscore the allegorical nature of the story. Cissé then cuts to a close-up of her son's hands, excavating two eggs hidden in the sand. He picks one and brings it to his mother who waits at the far end of the desert stretch. The boy places the egg at her feet and kneels before her to receive the instruments of power from her. Attou strips off the robe of Nianankoro, kneels down and hangs it over the shoulder of her son. She, in turn, picks up the egg and takes it to the spot where the wooden wing of the *Kore* still stands years after the confrontation between Nianankoro and his father. This marks the spot where Nianankoro stood during the confrontation. She places the egg on that spot, picks up the wooden emblem and walks along the long stretch of sand to hand it to her son. Placing the wooden wing on the shoulder of the child, she accompanies him for a few steps and leaves him to walk alone. With the mother removed from the scene, the static camera focuses on the boy until he walks out of view.

This sequence in which the director pays great attention to detail evokes the act of creation – a new beginning and the mother as source of life in a 'mother-centred African cultural universe' (Nzegwu 2011:256). Cissé concludes *Yeelen* in an open-ended style, with the young boy on a journey. Change is portrayed as a progressive phenomenon that is not without challenges and aspects of binarism remain a life principle in Bambara mythology. The young boy finds two eggs buried in the sand. One egg symbolises what Nianankoro stands for (good), the other represents Soma Diarra (the antagonist). As the boy boldly begins to move



forward, loaded with the instruments of power, the director cuts to the eggs that remains half-buried in the sand, as if to remind the viewer that even at this new dawn of change, the undesirable could erupt. The caution against the naive celebration of political change as necessarily ushering in good governance in an instant is registered here. Change is sustained by continuous decisions and actions. The hopeful future is represented as a reality still to be constructed by the community. Everything is still in its embryonic stage. The boy, bold and determined as he may be, is still a child and one cannot tell with certainty whether the egg he picked will hatch into a healthy life. In this final sequence, the desirable values required for leadership, such as humility and dependence on the other, are contrasted with arrogance and the desire to dominate. The paradox of power laid in the hand of a little child communicates the 'new' and needed value of togetherness as well as the support to make it work. The film is like a creation (re-creation) story in this sense. It begins with sunrise and ends with sunset. Evil has been symbolically brought to its sunset (end) as a new dawn is awaited.<sup>9</sup> The woman's role in this has been to bring the predestined child to the threshold of a new dawn.

Cissé's portrayal of the two mothers who essentially play the same role endorses and ennobles their traditional roles. Because the major power struggle in the film is not centred on gender issues, their exclusion in exercising public leadership goes almost unnoticed. Although their total absence from the Komo hegemonic group is evident, the film does not explicitly suggest any move to bring them into the public sphere. This augments the view of Ogunidipe (in Stratton 1994:15) that although the labour of African women is used by men to succeed in the public sphere, their exclusion from this space is considered natural. The backdrop roles the mothers play as nurturers, custodians and transmitters of society's wisdom and as civilising agents make them irreproachable and worthy of respect. This film, which corresponds with traditional perspectives in most African cultures, shows that it is acceptable for a woman to hold transitory authority until a boy child is responsible enough to take up leadership. Attou wears the robe of Nianankoro until she willingly transfers power to the rightful holder – her son. This is done in such a smooth way that it gives the impression of naturalness. As is evident in other African narratives (Kiyimba 2010:36) the projection of the little boy as the future leader symbolically communicates the undisputed perception of the male as a public leader. The woman as deputy of the man is expected to willingly oblige in handing over interim power once the situation normalises so that the status quo is maintained (Okafor 2010:159).

The role played by the two mothers has a disarming effect on the viewer. Both are represented as faultless in living out their destinies. The actual oppression women experience remains hidden and is smoothed away in this idyllic representation. For instance, Attou's childlessness is automatically blamed on her, just as it would be in real life. Because virility is a principle of masculine identity, men do not usually acknowledge their weakness in this regard (Odinga 2011:464). The Peul king who could be responsible for 'Attou's' barrenness remains irreproachable. He, in fact, appears benevolent in subjecting Attou to Nianankoro's treatment and is later the offended one when the healer becomes physically involved with his wife. The ennobling image of motherhood remains the unchallenged myth in this film that proposes a revolution for a new humanity to emerge. As Ngcobo (2007:540) points out, the power of patriarchal ideology is so encompassing that no single woman 'is able to shift the power of tradition. Abandoning certain practices in tradition does nothing for the embedded attitudes of African men'. In *Yeelen*, the link between the mother and Djigui represents the mutual and enhancing relationship that needs to exist between female and male agencies to create the desired model of governance in both public and domestic spheres. Cissé's ideal leader is a male whose masculinity has been revised by the feminine factor to create a balanced outcome (Mugambi 2010:90). Nianankoro and his son's intense relationships with their mothers are portrayed as desirable for grooming them for the art of governance. Motherhood emerges as the most satisfactory and reassuring icon to temper brute masculinity. The mother, in this sense, is often seen as different and above the female gender per se (El Saadawi 2007; Bleeker 2009).

## The elderly as harbingers of change

Women have frequently been associated with the traditional and the static in culture. In *Yeelen*, the maternal figures are both the repositories of traditional wisdom and are associated with the rebirth of society. In Gerima's *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, a grandmother appears in two brief sequences to make significant comments.<sup>10</sup> In the first sequence she gives a resigned answer to her daughter who naturally complains about her heavy workload in the master's field and later when she returns home to respond to her family's need for a meal. She tells her daughter, 'Well, this is our life. What else can we do?' The second time the grandmother makes a comment is when she has to listen to Beletech's dream about the end of the landlord's reign. In both instances, the grandmother is represented as the upholder of traditional ethos. She tries to stop Beletech



from narrating her dream in the evening – dreams are traditionally told in the morning. However, when she realises that the young girl cannot be restrained, she listens with enthusiasm to Beletech's vision of change in the future. She affirms her granddaughter's dream and joyfully exclaims: 'This is a real dream that can only be dreamt by young people'.

On the whole women, including the elderly, are portrayed as more open to change than men. As members of the community who are marginalised by patriarchal society and are often deprived of certain privileges, their social positioning makes them more willing allies of change than men (Odinga 2011; Tamale 2011; Tsanga 2011). In her enthusiasm for change, the grandmother in *Harvest: 3 000 Years* can be compared to the grandmother in Cissé's *Finyé*. The grandmother in this film desires change as much as the students who are actively involved in struggling against the military regime. When old Kansayé returns from his last visit to the oracle and finds his home destroyed at Sangaré's orders, he decisively sets his religious robe and other symbols of traditional authority and ancestral belief on fire. He has come to realise that times have changed and his fetishes are not effective for solving present problems. His wife (the grandmother), who is surprised and relieved at the same time to see the fetishes ablaze, exclaims: 'Allah's times are changing. A miracle!' This miracle becomes evident when the students storm Kansayé's compound shortly after, giving him their support in demanding Ba and his colleagues' release from prison. Kansayé too invokes God's blessings on the youth and tells them: 'What you are doing is without a price. Our time is over. The world is yours. I will stand by you'. With his protective traditional gear burnt, this is the first time Kansayé takes a risk. This is something totally new for a traditional chief of his calibre. Now he is as vulnerable to bullets as any of the students with whom he is marching. Paradoxically, it is this leap of faith of unarmed people protesting against a brutal military regime that turns the tables against Sangaré. The requirements for defeating this oppressive regime are unity, sacrifice, vulnerability and faith.

The relationship between the old couple, Kansayé and his wife, is characterised by respect and mutual understanding – very unlike the relationship between Governor Sangaré and his three wives. In the portrayal of this old couple, Cissé deconstructs the easy male-female binary stereotypes. Although Kansayé, as symbol of traditional patriarchal authority, is portrayed as stern and his grandchildren use their grandmother to 'disarm' him before they can approach him, he is tender and caring beneath the façade of toughness – a result of the masculine 'script' he has acted all his life (Vaughan 2000). The viewer

sees the softer side of Kansayé when the oracle tells him that the ancestors have no answers on how to get Ba out of prison because this is a ‘modern’ problem. Kansayé silently weeps and feels let down by a belief system that had previously held things together. His tear-drenched face on this occasion contrasts with the loud, but tearless, wails of the grandmother who watches Sangaré’s soldiers ransack their home and turn it into a ruin. As she tells Kansayé how the soldiers came and turned the house upside-down, she is quite composed and her voice does not betray any emotion. Their gender and social positioning makes them react differently to the same situation. It is the man who has a stronger stake in maintaining the status quo who finds it harder to accept change than the woman. In the context of this film, the tears of Kansayé, a fearsome traditional authority in a patriarchal community, is part of the ‘miracle’ that indicates formidable tradition is being blown away by the winds of change. Although Kansayé is also a centre of authority, his use of power offers a contrast to Sangaré who abuses his office of leadership. Kansayé, the traditional authority figure, uses a non-violent approach to solve problems. He carries an unloaded gun as a deterrent and does not even threaten his enemy with it (Boughedir 1992:82). This contrasts with Sangaré’s fear-driven and violent authority. Kansayé’s benevolence is further seen when he forgives drug-influenced Ba for the grave offence of laying violent hands on his grandmother. The victim of Ba’s disrespectful conduct, his grandmother, is herself the first to forgive him and later to plead with Kansayé to forgive their grandson. Later in the film Kansayé extends his forgiveness to Batrou, whom he had treated meanly for being the daughter of Sangaré. He realises that the new generation is a ‘clan’ of its own in pursuing their objective to have the governor removed from office and issues of gender, class and social status are not important to them. For the first time he calls Batrou ‘granddaughter’, thus showing his acceptance of her into his family. This warm familial relationship contrasts with Sangaré’s treatment of his family. Traditional authority, represented by the grandparents, is portrayed as providing the right direction and formation for the young, while the dictatorship of Sangaré’s military rule seeks to destroy the youth who want good governance. Old Kansayé represents the dynamic force of African tradition upon which the younger generation of leaders need to build. Cissé dedicates his mythical film *Yeelen* to this traditional wisdom, founded on the feminine principles of sharing and cooperation. The ‘return to source’ as variously articulated by feminists like Vaughan (2000) and Von Werlhof (2005) is the return to the ‘mother’ principles of life.



In Dikongué-Pipa's *Muna Moto*, although the mothers of both Ndome and Ngando are portrayed as silent and apparently subservient to the ruthless authority of their husbands, in their quiet ways they undermine oppressive patriarchy. Ndome's mother does not overtly disturb the status quo although she does not agree with the procedure followed in her daughter's marriage. She remains subdued when her husband rudely silences her for attempting to propose an alternative. While Ndome chooses to lose her virginity before marriage as a form of resistance and becomes pregnant, her mother hatches a plan to save her honour. In a social setup where marrying a virgin brings honour to both mother and daughter, she suggests 'fixing' Ndome's lost virginity with herbs to fool her husband into thinking that she is still a virgin. Although Ndome turns down her mother's suggestion because the very act of losing her virginity is an act of rebellion, it is worth noting that even in this fear-riddled atmosphere, the mother schemes and plays along with patriarchy's desire for virgins. Her suggesting that Ndome presents herself as a virgin, even when she is not, is a form of resistance that foils the status quo and shows the various ways in which women may play with the demands patriarchy makes of them (Tamale 2011:156–157).

In *Finzan* two kinds of elderly women are portrayed. The mothers of Nanyuma and Bengali represent a category that is aware of their disadvantaged position, though they do not have the courage to do anything about it. They have accepted this as 'their lot'. The fear that surrounds them shows that even elderly women with grown children cannot, in certain circumstances, consider their husbands' homes as their own as they are often threatened with dismissal for taking their children's part. These traditional mothers are portrayed as passive, silent, tolerant, and obedient in performing their duties and obligations, even if they are inherently opposed to them. They do not seem to be aware that there are other alternatives open to them (Leshabari 1994:35). The second group of elderly women is the respected custodians of traditional values. Like the *salindana* in *Moolaadé*, they are 'honoured' (by patriarchy) with the responsibility of carrying out the ritual of excision. For these women who enjoy status and privileges in the community, it is unthinkable that a young woman would want to remain unpurified by the knife. This has become their status symbol as well as their livelihood and they will do everything to protect their 'trade'.

In *Yaaba* and *Tilai* the elderly play significant roles in advancing the plots of the films. Sana, a victim of society's prejudices, suffers the kind of isolation from which women in Africa who reach old age without a husband

and children suffer. Such a woman is viewed with pity and even hostility as a social misfit (Akujobi 2011; Okiria 2011). Ouédraogo, however, uses Sana to challenge society to learn more accommodative ethics in treating people who are different from ‘us’. In spite of her loneliness, she remains true to the image of the grandmother, viewed in traditional African societies as the source of wisdom and goodness. Similarly, in *Tilai* Koudpoko, Saga’s mother, quietly supports her sons who are against their father’s tyranny. She communicates the depth of her love in silent devotion and the intensity of communication between mother and sons exceeds and makes up for the lack of communication with the authoritarian father. Buffeted by the conflict and tension created by the father’s authority, each son seeks refuge in the mother and she suffers the pain her sons go through. She discreetly exercises her irresistible influence that affects even the father. She creates an environment of harmony and forgiveness in the family while the father’s rage scatters and destroys. In her position as a mother of grown sons, she enjoys a high degree of independence and dignity. It is not only the children who seek her counsel. Namenabe, the patriarch, also seeks a mother’s wisdom, tenderness and compassion in moments he finds challenging. When his conflict with Saga drains him and disturbs his peace, he goes to Koudpoko for advice and consolation. The dialogue between the two on this subject divulges the venerable position this elderly mother holds in the family. Namenabe unexpectedly visits her hut at night and she notices that he is disturbed.

Koudpoko: I didn’t expect you! You are upset.  
Because of Nogma?

Namenabe: Not because of her, because of Saga.

Koudpoko: Saga came to see me.

Namenabe: What did he say?

Koudpoko: Nothing. He’s your son; forgive him.

Namenabe: [Gets angry at the suggestion.] Not unless he makes the first move [he gets up and abruptly leaves. She gives an ironic smile].

The paradox here is that Namenabe seeks his wife’s advice, but when she gives it, he is offended by her advice to ‘forgive’. His refusal to listen to a conciliatory advice, which is often dismissed as weakness, is a tragic facet of patriarchal authoritarianism. Such an inflexible authority can only be met by resistance. The



way both Saga and Kougri respond to their mother's sickness demonstrates her centrality to the family. In the same way, the authoritarian father demonstrates rare tenderness and devotion towards his sick wife, whose side he never leaves until she dies. The death of this maternal figure is significant in this film where patriarchal authority remains rigid and unrelenting in its destructive energy. The 'mother principle' is dead in this kind of environment.

## Conclusion

The portrayal of elderly women in the above films goes beyond generic simplifications. In films set in precolonial Africa, elderly women tend to adhere to the status quo. However, behind the scenes they foil and challenge the structure whenever it becomes too oppressive and they discreetly assist younger people who are actively involved in challenging oppression. The elderly are therefore not totally caught up in static, traditional structures. The female elders are more eager to welcome change than their male counterparts. Furthermore, as observed by MacRae (1999b:241), comparatively, elderly women experience greater independence than younger women:

Because of their repertoire of experience and their relative freedom from the cycle of pregnancy and child rearing, mature and elderly women have developed greater personal autonomy and social sophistication than their younger counterpart.

This gives credence to Oyewumi's (1997:40) observation about the importance of seniority in Yoruba culture that tends to bypass gender in certain instances. Overall, the respectful treatment the elderly mother is accorded as discussed in this chapter is distinctly different from the treatment of the young female as discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the consecration of motherhood and the attendant self-sacrifice is the ideal female identity, especially in *Yeelen* that represents motherhood as an alternative centre of authority to patriarchy. However, despite this idealisation of motherhood, the female agency is still relegated to the background in the narrative resolution. The mothers play the role of custodians of the cultural repertoire of sagacity to be activated when society needs redirection, but they are not yet to become directly involved in the exercise of power as if the filmmakers fear that the 'hand' of this civilising female agent to male authority will be dirtied in the practical exercise of power and there will be nothing for society to return to. As alternative power sources, these mothers wield a different kind of authority – the kind that unites and cements family relationship with self-effacing compassion, forgiveness and love behind the scenes.<sup>11</sup> I would add that the mother's capacity for bolstering social

relationships extolled here would put her in an excellent position to assume public, decision-making responsibilities within society. If she is so valued in the management of family conflicts, why would she not be given more space in the public forum to do the same? This question is implied, though not answered in these films that exalt the wisdom of the mother without giving her public space to exercise the same authority. She remains, in the words of Mabenga (2000:205):

[A] sanctuary of human life, the mother is among the most venerated in African tradition. A mother is a symbol of selfless love and goodness; she is the image of human heroism because of her extraordinary spirit of sacrifice<sup>12</sup> [my translation from Italian subtitles].



## Endnotes

1. *[La vecchiaia] è uno stato di vita di beatitudine terrene. Il vecchia soffre, davvero. Ma la sua sofferenza, egli non la vive con disperazione né in condizione di abbandono. La cultura tradizionale... ha dato agli anziani un ruolo ed un valore che fanno di loro fino alla morte veri protagonisti della vita comunitaria.*
2. Politics is ever-present in Cissé's films. The characters often struggle against various forms of oppressive rule in both the domestic and public spheres as seen in his first feature film, *Den Muso/The Young Girl* (1975), where the protagonist struggles against the tyrannical rule of the father, which has tragic consequences for the entire family; *Baara/Work* (1978) which focuses on the workers' struggle for humane treatment and fair wages; *Finyé/The Wind* (1982) that is about students' demonstration against the dictatorship of Governor Sangaré; and *Yeelen/The Light* (1987) where father and son are caught up in a life-and-death struggle over power. The two men represent different paradigms of power use.
3. The Freudian Oedipus complex is quite overt in this film through the closeness between mother and son and the enmity between father and son, which leads to their destruction of each other.
4. I find it interesting that in helping the Peul to defeat their enemy, Nianankoro does not use destructive violence on the 'enemy'. He invoked natural powers – bees – to chase away the warriors who abandon their weapons as they take refuge from the bees. The victory that the Peul celebrates does not have anything to do with spilling the blood of another human. What Nianankoro's help does for them is to restore their dignity and give them relief from aggressive neighbours.
5. The Nunc Dimittis is Prophet Simeon's final prayer in the Bible. The holy temple elder was promised that before his death he would see the Messiah. When he encountered Mary and Joseph at the 'presentation' of the baby Jesus in the temple, the prophet broke into a song of gratitude for having seen the salvation of Israel in the person of the child Jesus; certain of the hope for the future of Israel, for the one who is a light to the nations has been born (Luke 2: 29-32). Simeon could now die in peace. Djigui gives a similar exclamation when he sees Nianankoro.
6. The tethered goat in the opening sequence is never sacrificed. To emphasise the abnormality of Soma Diarra's destructive sacrifice, the size of the sacrifice increases from the chicken he offers to the gods to help him find his son so that he can destroy him as a 'usurper' of an ancestral fetish, to the final self-sacrifice of Nianankoro, his son. The goat, the would-be sacrifice for initiating Nianankoro into the cult of the *Komo* is not sacrificed because of his father's perverted use of power. Nianankoro is the willing, redemptive scapegoat for the 'salvation' of the community.
7. The role of the artist conflates with that of Djigui. Like the blind prophet, who experiences the tyranny of *Komo*, Cissé too had to change his style of filmmaking from

explicitly militant and social-realist to mythical and allegorical. What is important is that the prophetic voice remains active and influential.

8. Diawara appropriately compares Nianankoro to other popular West African epic heroes like Sundiata, Maren Jagu and Kambili, who all act as links between the present and the future towards which they journey.
9. The symbolic dawn-sunset structure of *Yeelen* makes it highly ritualistic. In many African traditional religious rituals, cleansing and reconciliation ceremonies begin at dawn and end at sunset. The significance of this is that the evil forces should go down with the setting sun, so that the new dawn brings the good. The strong note of hope at the end of this film seems to follow this structure.
10. It is significant to note that, in this film, there is no mention of a grandfather. This trend appears to be aligned with Gerima's dynamic portrayal of grandmotherly characters in his other films: *Sankofa* (1993), *Ashes and Embers* (1982) and *Bush Mama* (1976).
11. This idea of self-effacement, as central to women's identity, is expressed in the Akamba (Kenyan) proverb: 'The mother of the big he-goat has no horn'.
12. The original text in Italian: [*La madre è un*] *tabernacolo della vita umana, la madre è una persona tra le più venerate nella tradizione africana. La madre è un simbolo di un amore e una bontà senza interessi; è la immagine dell'eroismo umano a causa del suo straordinario spirito di sacrificio.*



# 5

## *Recurrent trends in gender representation in African cinema*

### **Introduction**

This book presents an analysis of the representation of three categories of women in selected films directed by male African filmmakers from black Africa. I have engaged with three broad clusters – the girl child, the young woman and the elderly (grandmotherly) figure – all in relation to their male counterparts. Cinema, for most African filmmakers, is neither a popular form of entertainment nor a celebration of a national myth, but rather a critical, political and ideological instrument (Tchouaffe 2009). In a way, most filmmakers see themselves as modern griots who have responsibilities towards their communities. They thus use the artistic means at their disposal to tell stories that reverberate beyond their immediate communities and audience. The concerns of the filmmakers discussed in this book are wide-ranging, covering precolonial, colonial and postcolonial African experiences. The filmmakers appropriate the traditional forms of artistic expression and use them in new and revolutionary styles, often to challenge the status quo, including foundational myths (Diawara 1992). My analysis points out the inflections of filmmakers in the representation of women and gender questions in selected films. The narratives about women often reveal their alternative perspectives that still need to be foregrounded for the wellbeing of community perspectives that have been silenced by the official, dominant masculine parameters upon which the communities' values are built. The filmmaker, as articulated by Sembène, often taps into the popular memory of his community and rewrites the people's history, using his artistic vision. The

purpose of this is to engage audiences in conversations with the films (Sembène in Downing 1987). A number of tendencies emerge in the representation of these three categories of women.

## Trends in the representation of women

The African woman does not have a unified identity in the context of hierarchical patriarchy where she is continually involved in negotiating her position (Bakare-Yusuf 2003). The female as a child, as a young woman or as an elderly woman is positioned differently in the community as the analysis in this book shows. The representation of the elderly woman as a model of wisdom and virtue is diffused in African cinema. Often, the elderly woman is portrayed as being far superior to the man as an alternative centre of authority. She is there as a moral yardstick that challenges oppressive patriarchal authority in a revisionary manner. She calls attention to what is missing without wanting to dominate or take power. The lofty traits given to elderly mother figures in these films show veneration for them as those who ‘bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power’s rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty’ (Stratton 1994:169). This is particularly seen in the representation of the two mother figures in *Yeelen*, a film dedicated to activating the feminine principle that has been brushed aside over years of patriarchal rule. Both mothers teach their sons the correct art of leadership and the use of authority. When their job is done, they quietly withdraw into the background to let their male children play their destined roles in the political sphere. In this regard, the status quo in gender relations is reinforced as orderly and harmonious. Despite the clear portrayal of the oppressiveness of the Komo cult and the supremacy given to the female factor (*Kore*), Cissé does not propose women’s entry into a revolutionised, political ‘cult’; they remain the invisible protagonists in society. This makes their portrayal rather static in a revolutionary film. This is the kind of portrayal African feminists like Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1985) and Afonja (1990) refer to as ‘tokenistic’. While it is deductive in its conferment of honour on the ‘mother’, in the words of (Lewis nd):

The myth of the black woman as strong mother and nurturer, ever-sacrificing, ever-dutiful and denying her own pain and thoughts ... [has] potentially coercive effects ... [and they are] more oppressive sources of the Black-woman-strong-mother image, particularly because the image is so seductive, seemingly celebrating an empowering identity for a politically subordinate group.



This fictional representation correlates with contemporary debates on the absence and paucity of women in the active political forum of decision-making. According to scholars like Diop (1988), Amadiume (1998), Oyewumi (2005) and Nzegwu (2011), the position of the African woman in society has degenerated since the colonial period. Their argument is that prior to this period, African women exercised considerable power in the public sphere as queens, queen mothers, priestesses or members of councils. The women, who had political capital in and outside the domestic sphere as members of councils, maintained some degree of autonomy and provided occasion for building solidarity among women. Such groups helped endow 'women with a psychological sense of self-esteem' (O'Barr 1984:143; Stratton 1994:7, 27).<sup>1</sup> The position of women in the public sphere regressed considerably during and after colonialism because the colonial officers who used Western mind-sets in political administration saw women's role as limited to the domestic and private sphere only. Public politics was treated solely as a male factor. Needless to say, these colonial administrators sought only male authority figures as collaborators in total disregard of women who held significant positions of authority (Hay & Stichter 1984:144–145). This policy continued the marginalisation of women in political matters in contemporary society. Convincing as this argument is, I must add that female agency in society, beginning with goddesses to queen mothers and councils of women, acted mostly as checks on male power. The 'considerable power' women exhibited was more symbolic than practical in political terms even then. The existence of these women councils as groups apart, not as part of the mainstream, points to the fact that even in precolonial Africa women were largely treated as the 'other'. In many patriarchal societies men remained very much at the helm of power although there were exceptional women. A filmmaker like Med Hondo makes a deliberate effort to highlight the significant public roles women historically played alongside men, as dramatised in *Sarraounia*. Even so, he creates the warrior queen as an exception rather than the rule and she is made to take on a 'male' leadership role on male terms at the cost of her femininity.

Although not many of the selected films feature women's active participation in the political sphere, the filmmakers implicitly draw attention to the absence and exclusion of women from this forum as a discussion point. This is evident in most of the films set in precolonial Africa.<sup>2</sup> The exclusion of women from the primary information flow means that they gain access to information through interpretations by men and in versions of the truth that are filtered to keep them in their place as women. In *Moolaadé*, Sembène goes a step further to create a

female protagonist who strive to access primary information to challenge men's distorted interpretations of the Qur'an on female excision, because this ritual appears to favour men. The direct access to information through the radio helps mobilise support from the womenfolk and the rest of the community to contest the ritual. Significantly, Colle's radio survives the conflagration of the men to show that the mass media can be an empowering and democratising tool, especially if used for the benefit of the marginalised in society. Sembène's provocative stance is seen in the ten-second final shot of the communication antennae that follows the shot of the pinnacle of the mosque as if to harmonise the media (modernity) with the mosque (Islam). The symbolic triumph of the woman in this film associates her with the radio, a modern means of communication and the source of her liberation in the context of Islam and tradition.

Films offer several examples of individuals and groups who challenge and rebel against oppressive traditions in society. Much of what is reflected in these mostly socio-realist films corresponds to the actualities in many African communities. A wave of change in gender relations is currently sweeping through most African countries. The constitutions of most countries have been amended (or are being amended) to accommodate the demands for gender equity and the rights of marginalised groups like women, children and persons with disabilities. These are aspects of the efforts of countries to become more democratic, although contradictions between what is written in these constitutions and practice still persist (Bennett 2011b). This desire for change is effectively portrayed by the various filmmakers analysed in this book. Often, the identification of the gender-relational challenges is clear, though the realisation of equity and fairness among the genders remains a grey area. On this, I quote one of the oldest African political leaders, deemed revolutionary in his heyday, Robert Mugabe<sup>3</sup> (quoted in Hay & Stichter 1984:157) who aptly explains the gender oppressive scenario that still persists:

Custom and tradition have tended more to favour men than women, to promote men and their status and demote women in status, to erect men as masters of the home, village, clan, and nation. Admittedly, women have ... *been allowed* [my italics] sometimes a significant, but at other times a deplorably insignificant role to play. The general principle governing relationships between men and women has, in our national society, always been that of superiors and inferiors. Our society has consistently stood on the principle of masculine dominance – the principle that the man is the ruler and the woman his dependant and subject.

Although filmmakers are critical in exposing the oppression of women, such entrenched mind-sets cannot change overnight. In *Finzan*, Sissoko deals



patriarchy a blow with the loss of young members of the community: the two young women who refuse to bow to cultural practices that abuse their human rights, and the two young men who follow Nanyuma into exile. A similar situation is seen in *Tilai* where the community loses two young men because of the oppressive rigidity of patriarchy. Such losses ultimately impoverish the community for a society that drives its challenging and dynamic members into exile is a dying one. Sembène radically returns to the theme of female excision in *Moolaadé* and mobilises an entire community to successfully resist the time-honoured tradition. The issue of female excision is still hotly debated in the parliaments and communities of many African countries where the practice is still culturally acceptable. Growing awareness about human rights makes this practice contested, especially by female activists.

The subject of bride price and the discourses around it remains another challenged practice in contemporary Africa. In *Muna Moto*, the director criticises the tradition of exorbitant bride price as a form of male control over women. Although the traditional rationale for this practice was gift exchange between two families in building community rapport through marriage, this practice has over the years degenerated into exorbitant and compulsory payments that advantage richer over poorer men. In such a situation, the women are objectified as the negotiation is effected solely by male parties. The show of power rather than genuine love becomes the driving force behind marriage. Several research projects confirm the strong link between bride price payment and the curtailing of women's decision-making abilities (Kaye et al 2005). The ability of filmmakers to expose social problems associated with the position of women and to engage the community in discussing them is commendable. When these cultural practices are removed from their apparently stable and accepted positions, they are opened for discussions and possibilities of change.

*Guelwaar* and *Madame Brouette* are examples of films that present the budding phenomenon of young, single women engaged in non-traditional lifestyles in cities and towns to eke out livings for them and the families that depend on them. This is a bold extension of the traditional women's preoccupation with providing for their families and living through difficult economic situations. The filmmakers' portrayals of sex workers are couched sympathetically and present the characters as women whose motives should be appreciated in context rather than be harshly judged. However difficult the challenges facing these women are, it is evident they have carved out a space for themselves to make a living in the city that was hitherto a male space (Dennis quoted in Stratton 1994:16–17). The filmmakers invite society to reflect on the roots of the problem instead

of easily victimising the women who are often scapegoats for their families (Tamale 2011).

In films set in traditional communities, the representation of women who make the first move to decisively reject their husbands because of their failures in marital matters challenges the status quo. Given the myth of male potency and virility in African sexuality, a woman is expected to gracefully bear the blame for her inability to give birth rather than reject a husband on such grounds. In some cultures male relatives discretely cover for their brother's incapacities, as seen in *Guelwaar*. Men on their part often do not accept their shortcomings in this regard and preserve the right to take a second or third wife to 'prove' their virility (Leshabari 1994:37; Odinga 2011). These social problems are portrayed in *Muna Moto*, *Wend Kuuni* and *Tilai* in diverse ways. In *Guelwaar*, Oumy's decision to return to her father is as decisive as Tikpoko's decision in *Wend Kuuni* to reject her husband who commits suicide because he cannot take the humiliation of being rejected on grounds of virility. The underlying message in these expositions is clear: men should learn to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own weaknesses.

Filmmakers have often used satire to contest the traditional male attitude of entitlement that pays no regard to their female partners. They ridicule and frustrate the desire of men of status to marry virgins in a bid to improve their image in society and to boost their egos, as seen in *Xala* and *Muna Moto*. Except in cases of chiefs and men of status, marriage was ordinarily monogamous in traditional Africa. The disruptive effect of polygamy on family life, portrayed in these films, suggests that polygamy is no longer viable in contemporary Africa. In fact, most of the marriages in the selected films set in precolonial Africa are portrayed as monogamous. Polygamy became a pragmatic practice in the context of a particular socio-economic situation: the necessity for a strong family labour force and also for begetting children. The practice was also endorsed because of the high infant mortality rate at the time. To have more than one wife thus came to be associated with the socio-economic status of a man. Since family continuity was the principal purpose of marriage in traditional Africa, polygamy was also resorted to when a woman failed to produce children (Bahemuka 1992:119–134; Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992:101–118). However, polygamy is often associated with the abuse of power. Clearly, African filmmakers critique this male prerogative that has become a source of tension within the family. Although men seem to be the beneficiaries of the practice, the films reveal that they are equally uncomfortable and stressed in polygamous relationships. They are often involved in managing their wives;



hence their failure to develop genuine companionship with their wives or among the women themselves. This is seen in five of the films analysed in this book: *Xala*, *Muna Moto*, *Finyé*, *Guelwaar* and *Moolaadé*. On the other hand, couples in monogamous marriages are portrayed as living in relative harmony. The old couples in *Finyé*, *Tilai*, *Wend Kuuni*, *Yaaba*, *Harvest: 3 000 Years* and *Guelwaar* are examples of this.

The films also reveal that the everyday reality of the African woman is far from passive and silent. Women are constantly involved in negotiating spaces within patriarchy and resisting oppression in various, often non-confrontational ways as seen in *Yaaba*, *Yeelen*, *Tilai*, *Wend Kuuni* and *Muna Moto*. This ability to act is a reality of African womanhood (O'Barr 1984:141), although women's position in some cultural practices has remained relatively unchanged despite broad changes sweeping through the continent (Ogundipe-Leslie 1984:15). Women contest gender oppression as individuals and groups, though they remain caught up in the structural web of patriarchy partly because of their exclusion and minority position in decision-making bodies. Since political and administrative powers mostly lie in the hands of men, women's emancipation can only be more effective with the active participation of men working alongside the women. Men, in this respect, need to be equally the target of feminist and gender consciousness. In the films discussed in this book, some men support the women's struggles as a result of being brought on board by the activism of the female characters. The turnaround made by mainstream men like Ibrahima and Ciré, in *Moolaadé*, shows the way in the struggle against gender-based violence against women. However, their good intentions notwithstanding, the filmmakers, working within a naturalised patriarchal discourse, at times find themselves at a loss to articulate gender-conscious arguments. In some situations, gender issues are subsumed into class and race arguments as seen in *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, *Xala*, *Guelwaar* and *Sarraounia*. Indeed, gender arguments seem pointless in situations where both men and women are oppressed on the basis of class and race.

In some films, however, the directors portray the girl child as more active in resisting oppression than the male. For example, in *Finyé*, Batrou and the female students stand out as clear-minded and focused on pursuing the objectives of the strike and opposing Batrou's autocratic father. Similarly, Beletech, in *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, is portrayed as a symbol of the essential spirit of resistance to oppression, present in all human beings. She acts on her own, without any external influence, to envision a future where the landlord's yoke will be broken. In *Moolaadé*, Amsatou, Collé and Khardjatou are far ahead of their male

counterparts in articulating oppositional stances and demonstrating readiness for the consequences of their choices. In this regard, women are, on the whole, represented as more decisive than men in their resistance to oppression. Their marginalised gender position enables them, at times, to see things differently from men.

Except for *Finzan*, *Moolaadé* and *Madame Brouette*, most of the films represent women and women's groups as apolitical. The female characters who demonstrate feminist consciousness, as in *Muna Moto*, *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, *Wend Kuuni* and *Tilai* are represented as individuals in a social context where the rest perceive their gendered roles as natural. The women's group in *Finzan*, for instance, has a clear political agenda and makes demands for the welfare of women to their chief. Even when Fili and Nanyuma leave the community, this active group of women remain as surety that the struggle will continue. The women's group in *Moolaadé* is the most radical and successful in achieving its objective and mobilising the men's support. Their success is stronger with the participation of men. While films like *Xala* show the failure of solidarity among the women as a group, *Madame Brouette* demonstrates the capacity for solidarity and friendship among women.

## Implications for film theory research

In my review of African feminist thoughts in Chapter 1 I make reference to Mulvey's (1991) psychoanalytical theory because of its centrality to Western feminist film theory. On the whole, Western feminist premises frame the experiences of middle-class, white women. Although their discontent with the minimal and stereotypical representation of women in Western films, framed by and for the male gaze links them with the concerns of African feminists, the latter still do not find their theorising of women inclusive enough to address the concerns of African womanhood. However, this is not to say that the African woman has a single identity as the discussions in this book show. In Mulvey's seminal theory, sexuality occupies a central place in the contention that women in Western movies lack agency and are portrayed as passive objects for the active male desire and gaze. Desire in this respect is represented as linear, with the man as the agent and the woman as a spectacle and the recipient of the gaze. This theory, with its focus on sexuality and lack of female agency, is not fully applicable to the gender representation in the films discussed in this book. All the selected filmmakers, in their different ways, are aware of the central roles women play in African communities. Since the films largely represent social-realist issues, the situations of the women represented often correspond to real-



life situations that show the woman as an active agent in society. They feature in these stories mainly because of the gender-based violence and discrimination they experience under patriarchy. That some of these male filmmakers take activist positions to emphatically tell women's often invisible or taken-for-granted stories, and thereby challenge the status quo, shows their commitment towards gender parity. The woman's perspective is seen as the missing link in Africa's development story. As has been articulated by African feminists, although patriarchy and its associated hierarchy of gender are some of the biggest obstacles facing the African woman, race and class are other significant layers of oppression the African woman faces together with the African man. At such moments gender is inevitably deferred and collapsed into race and class issues. This makes the African woman's struggle against patriarchy a complex one that requires careful balancing.

Nonetheless, African feminism is not totally isolated from the concerns of Western feminism. Both identify patriarchy as an entrenched system that has long stood in the way of women's liberation, though the contextual manifestations of the challenges may vary. The two broad brands of African feminisms – the gender base that sees patriarchy as the focal problem, and the dual sex base that argues for the complementarity of the genders as different centres of authority – are also echoed by Western feminism. For instance, theorists like Acholonu (1995), Oyewumi (1997) and Sudarkasa (1996), who argue for the primacy of motherhood in theorising on African women, are strongly matched by Western feminists like Vaughan and Von Werlhof who argue for the return to the original mother ethics to restore peace and harmony to society. Both theorists see the return to the 'gift economy' of motherhood as the way out for a more salutary society. The articulation of 'motherhood values' in theorising about women therefore appears to connect both Western and African feminists.

Following the three suppositions I started with in Chapter 1, of the three categories of female characters analysed in this book, the girl child's voice is often used by filmmakers as a shield whenever they challenge oppressive practices against women. This tendency that can well be labelled 'the ideology of the innocence of the young' is used when a filmmaker seems to be uncertain in dealing with gender relations, especially in the domestic sphere. In such situations, he seems to hide behind the child's 'innocent' comments that are often difficult for audiences to ignore. Whereas issues of class and race are lived outside the domestic sphere and can easily mobilise support from different social groups, the gender issues in the domestic sphere are more intricate. Thus, by comparison, pan-African and class issues are given greater urgency,

definitiveness, and are more often articulated by grown-ups than children. Exercising this discretion could be explained by the male filmmaker's greater stake in the patriarchal status quo. He may consciously or unconsciously not be keen to herald change in certain respects. This is evident in *Yaaba* and *Tilai* where Ouédraogo consistently keeps his distance and refrains from overt commitment to a cause. African filmmakers are diverse in their creative visions and styles of reflecting social issues. Activism is not an embedded quality of African filmmaking. The human rights concerns advanced by child characters are projected as things to be realised in the (distant) future. The children's voices are thus appealing, but 'toothless' to effect change 'now'. However, in spite of their gender socialisations, children often demonstrate tendencies towards crossing gender borders and challenging traditional stereotypes. They are also portrayed as promoters of a more compassionate and forgiving community, heralding the dawn of a new society.

The young woman category is the most active in contesting oppression and society in turn imposes its ethics on the young woman because she is seen as the link between the young and the old, and as the one responsible for the continuity of society's cherished values. The conflict between the individual and the community is evident in the relationship of continuity and discontinuity. When young women rebel they threaten the continuity of the values the community has held sacred for ages and this leads to them being severely punished by the community. In films set in the 1990s and 2000s, there are more instances of women contesting gender oppression without having to die or leave the community for their actions than before. Instead, at times, women's contestations lead to the men committing suicide because they cannot take the effrontery and 'humiliation', or men take the women's part in their struggles. Furthermore, the traditional preference for male over female children is shifting. In *Tilai*, both Saga and Nogma are happy for the child they are expecting regardless of the gender. On the other hand the filmmaker frustrates the expectations of the oppressive and impotent patriarch in *Muna Moto*, whose desperate search for a male child ends in his false claims of being the father of Ndome and Ngando's baby girl. In this satiric film, the patriarch ends up fighting for 'ownership' of the baby girl. This is what he is forced to settle for. The filmmakers' endowment of the girl child with incisive intelligence in *Harvest: 3 000 Years*, *Tilai*, *Madame Brouette* and *Moolaadé* all point in the direction of the need for the equal valuation of the genders. Filmmakers also show that oppressive male dominance in the domestic sphere corresponds with dictatorship in public administration. This is particularly so in Cissé's *Finyé*



and *Yeelen*. Paradoxically, younger men are inclined to hold onto traditional practices that favour their gender even when these go against the human rights of women as seen in *Finzan*.

The elderly (grandmotherly) figures are often thought of as transmitters of traditional values and as opposed to change. The analysis of the films in this book, however, shows that elderly women also contest the oppressive versions of patriarchy. The most venerated female image the filmmakers portray is the woman as mother. She is seen as the archetypal source of wisdom and life, qualifying the African world view, in the words of Nzegwu (2011:256), a 'mother-centred universe'. She is above male sexual control and enjoys great independence as an alternative centre of authority. She readily supports the justified causes of younger men and women who are actively involved in the struggle against gender oppression. On the whole, male filmmakers support women's causes against oppressive patriarchy.

The analysis in this book has been limited to selected films by male filmmakers from the African continent. Although the various regions share some features, Africa is complex and unique in the artistic and cultural forms from its different parts. The generalisations made in this book are accepted as broad tendencies that still leave plenty of room for further research into this field of study. A number of comparative studies could be undertaken on regional cinemas within the continent to reveal what is unique and similar in the treatment of gender questions. Research could also be undertaken into gender in African cinema and world cinemas to show the trend in global gender discourses and how this is reflected in the different cinemas. Furthermore, the growing body of films in the digital-video era provides a niche for comparative research into the area of gender in popular and art films from the continent. Finally, with the growing number of female filmmakers in the digital and video era, it is an opportune time for a comparative study of how male and female filmmakers represent gender issues. A close analysis of the film texts would test the claim of some feminists that women have a unique perception of life, which is often far different from that of men.

### Endnotes

1. Among the Ibo of Nigeria Idemili, the water deity, is the goddess that checks and balances the excesses of male authority so that no gender is marginalised. Her role is to establish a moral order in the exercise of authority. According to the Ibo creation myth, when God the creator saw how naked brute Power rampaged through the world, he sent his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's nude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty. Though the dominant principle of society remains male, the equilibrium between the dual powers, masculine and feminine, remain central in the traditional exercise of authority (Achebe 1987).
2. I acknowledge the changes and growing improvement in the number of women in public administration in many African countries today. The pressure they have continued to exert has led to some constitutional changes. Daily newspapers articles carry stories of domestic relations, previously considered private, that are now openly discussed as matters of human rights. This has led to changes and open discussions on cultural practices that were previously unquestionable such as female excision, wife inheritance, forced marriage and bride price.
3. This quote is from Mugabe's 1979 'Opening Speech to the First Zimbabwe Women's Seminar', May, *Zimbabwe News*, Maputo.



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