

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



African Film Series, Fall 2021

BLACK GIRL (1966)

Directed by Ousmane Sembene,
Senegal

Cinema in Senegal

The first Senegalese film, Paulin Vieyra's short *Afrique-sur-Seine*, was produced in 1955, but it was not until the independence of Senegal in 1960 that the industry truly began to develop. Writer Ousmane Sembène became one of the country's leading directors during this period by turning many of his short stories into films. He was particularly concerned with social change, and saw film as a way of reaching a wider audience. In 1963, Sembène produced his first film, a 20-minute short called *Barom Sarret* (*The Wagoner*). The film is often considered the first film ever made in Africa by a Black African and depicts the poverty-stricken life still prevalent in Senegal following independence, through the daily routine of a cab driver. In 1966 he produced his first and Senegal's first feature film, *La Noire de...*, based on one of his own short stories; and it also became the first feature film ever released by a sub-Saharan African director. Though only 60 minutes long, the French-language film won him the Prix Jean Vigo, bringing immediate international attention to both film in Senegal and African cinema generally.

The 1970s are considered the Golden Age of film in Senegal. Director Djibril Diop Mambéty released a number of films during this period with deep social meaning and representation. Like Sembène his films were unconventional, surrealist, fast-paced, with social realist narratives. Mambéty's earliest film, a short entitled *Contras City* (1968), contrasted cosmopolitanism in Dakar's baroque architecture against the poverty-stricken areas. His feature-length debut, *Touki Bouki* (*The Hyena's Journey*) in 1973, which commentators consider his most dynamic representation of social isolation and juxtaposition in Senegal, was made with a budget of \$30,000, partly funded by the Senegalese government. The film features lovers, Mory and Anta, who symbolically fantasize about fleeing Dakar for a romanticized France, representing the changing situation in Senegalese society and the transition to a new era. Of Mambéty's contribution to Senegalese film during this period, Sheila Petty, a scholar in African Studies notes, "unlike other African filmmakers of the late 1960s and early 1970s whose films were structured around essentialist nationalist discourse focused on the binary opposition of African values versus cultural alienation, Mambéty sought to expose the diversity of real life."

Safi Faye, who first appeared in 1972 with her short film *La Passante* (*The Passerby*) in which she also starred, was encouraged by French ethnologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch to use film making as an ethnographic tool. As a student in Paris, she raised money needed to produce films by accepting work as a model, an actor and in film sound effects. She received a PhD in

ethnology from the University of Paris in 1979 and immediately began studying video production in Berlin. She obtained financial backing for *Kaddu Beykat* from the French Ministry of Cooperation, and it became the first feature film made by a Sub-Saharan African woman commercially distributed and receiving international recognition. On its release, however, it was banned in Senegal. In 1976 it won the FIPRESCI Prize from the International Federation of Film Critics and the OCIC Award.

Also in the 1970s, journalist Ben Diogaye Bèye began filming a series of short films in Senegal. His second film, *Samba Tali*, was released in and received the Best Short Film Prize at the Festival International du Film de l'Ensemble Francophone in Geneva in 1975 and at the Carthage Festival in 1976. Bèye would produce and direct his first feature film, *Sey, Seyti*, in 1980, which was a raised criticism of polygamy in Senegal. It was the runner up for the Best Screenplay Prize at a contest organized for the Francophone countries by the Agency for Technical and Cultural Cooperation. It received an honorable mention at the Locarno Film Festival and the Prix de la Commune Pan-African Film Festivals in 1980 and 1981, respectively. In the mid-1980's, Senegalese cinema experienced a significant decline. Successful directors such as Sembene and Faye had enough resources to continue making films, but the country lacked the funding sources needed to develop the industry to fulfill its potential. Any films produced since have almost entirely been financed from abroad and exhibited at international film festivals rather than in Senegal.

Director Biography

Ousmane Sembene (1923 -2007)

The son of a fisherman, Ousmane Sembène was born in 1923 to a Lebou family in Senegal. From childhood he was exposed to the Serer religion, especially the *Tuur festival*, in which he was made "cult servant". Although the *Tuur* demands offerings of curdled milk to the ancestral spirits, Sembène did not take his responsibility seriously and was known for drinking the offerings made to the ancestors. Some of his adult work draws on Serer themes. His maternal grandmother reared him and greatly influenced him, and women play a major role in his works. Sembène's knowledge of French and basic Arabic besides Wolof, his mother tongue, followed his attendance at a madrasa, as was common for many Islamic boys, and a French school until 1936. Sembène worked with his father until 1938, then moved to Dakar, where he worked a variety of manual labour jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the Senegalese Tirailleurs (a corps of the French Army). After the war, he returned to his home country and in 1947 participated in a long railroad strike, on which he later based his seminal novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1960).

Late in 1947, Sembene stowed away to France, where he became active in the trade union movement. He joined the Communist party, helping lead a strike to hinder the shipment of weapons for the French colonial war in Vietnam. During this time, he discovered the Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay and the Haitian Marxist writer Jacques Roumain. As an author concerned with social change, Sembène wished to touch a wide audience. He realized that his written works would reach only the cultural elites, but that films could reach a much broader African audience.

Select Filmography

Borom Sarret (1963)

Ceddo (1977)

Niaye (1964)

Camp de Thiaroye (1988)

La Noire de...(1966)

Guelwaar (1992)

Mandabi (1968)

Faat Kine (2000)

Emitaï (1971)

Moolaade (2004)

Xala (1975)

Ousmane Sembene's Black Girl Turns 50

By A.O. Scott, New York Times
May 17, 2016

The Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène, habitually described as the father of African cinema, was a lifelong critic of patriarchy. An avowedly political artist — he had been a labor organizer and a novelist before turning to filmmaking — Mr. Sembène grounded his attacks on colonial oppression and post-independence corruption and compromise in a feminism that could be both subtle and blunt.

“When women progress, society progresses,” he remarked late in his career — he died in 2007 — and the suffering and stoicism of women figure in all phases of his work. His penultimate feature, “Faat-Kiné” (2001), is the portrait of a defiantly independent entrepreneur in Dakar, Senegal, a single mother who refuses the melodramatic options of pity or shame that would have been her conventional cinematic fate. Mr. Sembène’s final movie, the indelible “Moolaadé” (2004), followed a group of women in a rural village organizing to stop the traditional practice of genital cutting. The empathy and the radicalism that animate those films were present much earlier, in “Black Girl,” his first feature, which begins a weeklong run at BAM Rose Cinemas on Wednesday before its release on DVD by Criterion.

“Black Girl,” which turns 50 this year and has been restored, is one of those works of art that is at once powerfully of its moment and permanently contemporary. Sixty-five minutes long, filmed in a handful of locations in narrow-screen black-and-white, with sound dubbed in afterward, the movie can be regarded, among other things, as a masterpiece of thrift. Mr. Sembène, working with the French cinematographer Christian Lacoste and a small, nonprofessional cast, had the ingenuity — the vision — to turn material limitations to artistic advantage. The unsynchronized dialogue, which seems to float above the heads of the characters rather than emerging from their mouths, gives the action a dreamlike quality and infuses an objectively grim, realistic story with poetry and longing.

The story might have been suggested by a brief article in a French newspaper, a terse and tragic police-blotter item shown on screen near the end of the film. “Black Girl” is thus, in some ways, a documentary after the fact, an attempt to trace an awful, easily forgotten event to its source and to emphasize its political implications. The fate of an individual — a domestic worker

who has traveled from Senegal to work as a nanny and housekeeper for a middle-class family in France — is used to illuminate larger issues of identity, exploitation and displacement.

That sounds like standard neorealism, and Mr. Sembène's affinities with postwar Italian cinema are apparent, even if they are probably less a matter of influence than of shared ideological and aesthetic impulses. His first short, the 18-minute "Borom Sarret," which is being released along with "Black Girl," feels like a succinct variation on the theme of Vittorio De Sica's "Bicycle Thieves." It chronicles a day in the life of a horse-cart driver in Dakar trying to feed his family and preserve his dignity in the face of obstacles large and small.

His predicament is not unlike that faced by Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse Diop), the title character of "Black Girl," whose daily routines of drudgery and tedium drive her into depression and worse. But while both characters are representative of a social condition — the poverty and injustice that festered in Senegal after independence; the inequalities that persist between white French citizens and their former colonial subjects — they do not seem like puppets in a political passion play.

On the contrary, the force of Mr. Sembène's art — the sheer beauty that is the most striking feature of his early films — lies in his humanism. The task "Black Girl" sets itself is not just to note the facts of Diouana's life but also to assert her visibility, to ensure that she is seen. Several years before the phrase "black is beautiful" entered the lexicon of American racial politics, "Black Girl" insisted as much from its very opening frames. Ms. Diop, dressed in a white polka-dot dress and turban, moves through a world dominated by blinding, literal whiteness.

The blazing sun of Antibes, the Mediterranean city where Diouana's employers live, gives their high-rise apartment an almost hallucinatory quality. Its walls are blank and bleached, and its inhabitants are cold and self-absorbed. Diouana's psychological unraveling can partly be traced to her physical environment, which in turn underlines her cultural and existential isolation. The symbol of her alienation is a mask that she gives her employers as a gift and later tries to take back. It hangs on the wall of the Antibes apartment, a memento of home and also a totem of her estrangement from it.

Mr. Sembène flashes back to the lively, dusty streets of Dakar, but he was never one to promote an idealized or sentimental picture of Senegal, or to refrain from criticizing its postcolonial

governments. Nor, for all the specificity of its setting, does "Black Girl" offer an easily digestible picture of African identity. The solution to Diouana's crisis, in other words, is far from simple, partly because her problems are themselves complicated. In Dakar, she dreams of going to France. When that dream comes true, she longs to be back in Senegal. She is hardly a picture of saintly stoicism, but a young woman subject to the usual range of emotions. To the couple for whom she works, she appears lazy, sullen and irrational, an example of the difficulty of finding good help.

Mr. Sembène uses her inner state, and Ms. Diop's impassive features and upright bearing, to draw a map of modern oppression. Diouana is an African migrant in France, a woman in a male-dominated society and, perhaps above all, an exploited worker in a brutal, global cash economy. Not one of these identities is the key to the others. They function together, ensnaring her efforts to feel herself fully human — to discover who she is — in a web of constraints.

For all its abundant historical interest, "Black Girl" unfolds in the present tense, and directs its characters and its audience toward a still-unwritten future. The last shot, back in Dakar, is of a boy holding Diouana's mask halfway over his face, looking directly into the camera. Who was he? Who is he? Who will he become?