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Official History, Popular Memory: Reconfiguration of the African Past in the Films of Ousmane Sembène

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I would like to begin my presentation by quoting the words of a griot. His name is Diali Mamadou Kouyaté; he performed the *Sundiata* epic, which has been transcribed by Djibril Tamsir Niane. The griot starts his performance with these words:

I am a griot. . . we are the vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us, the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind. . . History has no mystery for us. . . for it is we who keep the keys to the twelve doors of Mali. . . I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example. For the world is old, but the future springs from the past.²⁷

The last two decades in Africa have yielded a significant crop of films devoted primarily to a critical engagement with the African past as a way of coming to terms with the many crises and challenges confronting contemporary African societies. This current preoccupation with history, and its implications for the present, underlies a number of films which have been produced during these past two decades. Ousmane Sembène, of course, led the way with "Emitaï," "Ceddo," and more recently, "Camp de Thiaroye." This is also a strain that has pretty much defined many of the films of Med Hondo of Mauritania, more specifically, a film he produced in 1978 entitled "West Indies," which is an adaptation of a play with the same title by a Martinican playwright, Daniel Boukman, and Hondo's latest film, entitled "Sarraounia," which came out in 1986. Also in this category is a recent film produced by a young filmmaker from Guinea-Bissau, whose name is Flora Gomes. The title of the film is "Mortu Nega," and it is a reconstruction of the recent history of Guinea-Bissau during and after the armed liberation struggle against Portuguese colonialism. There is also a young Malagasy filmmaker, Raymond Rajaonarivelo, who in 1988 came out with another film that reconstructs an event that took place in the context of the Second World War in the Malagasy Republic, and the title of that film is "Tabataba." We also have two recent films from Ghana. One is by a young Ghanaian filmmaker who is currently residing in London.

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His name is John Akomfrah; his 1988 film entitled “Testament” looks at the Nkrumah era in Ghana. The other one, “Heritage Africa,” also a 1988 film, is by Kwaw Ansah.

So dominant is this current in contemporary African filmmaking that one is reminded of a statement made by Jorge Fraga, a Cuban filmmaker and member of the Cuban Film Institute: “Cuban filmmakers are always viewing things from a historical perspective because, ‘we can’t help it.’”²⁸ Judging from the recently finished films, as well as a number of projects that are currently in production, it seems that African filmmakers too cannot help but look at things from a historical perspective. The necessity of looking at the present in the past is made urgent by the fact that the histories of former colonies have been characterized by arbitrary fictions, fictions such as the White Man’s Burden, Manifest Destiny, Hegel’s Africa beyond the pale of history, repeated by Hugh Trevor-Roper’s notion of history in Africa as only the history of Europeans in Africa, and so on and so forth. And because of these fictions, African filmmakers and other artists have taken on the task of purging their histories of these imposed remembrances. In turning to the pre-colonial and colonial past, many contemporary African filmmakers repeat, with a significant difference of course, the gestures of an earlier generation of African artists, who in their various ways responded to prevailing Western fictions and orthodoxies about Africa and Africans by effecting a return to the sources in the form of counter-accounts and reconstructions of Africa before the arrival of Europeans.

Early in this century—in the twenties, thirties, and forties—some African poets and novelists developed Négritude and other cognate rallying cries and ideologies as a framework for delving into the African past in order to intervene in and alter dominant Eurocentric versions of Africa and Africans by introducing different African versions of Africa and Africans. I don’t wish to explore here how authentic these Négritude versions of Africa and Africans were, but the point I am interested in is the act of looking back as a means of coming to terms with current prevailing beliefs and orientations and challenges in Africa. While the contemporary African filmmaker repeats the historical moves of his Négritude predecessor, he does so with a different set of ideologies and orientations, a different conception of history and tradition, and under a different set of social, political, and cultural circumstances. Given these differences, what emerges in recent African film is a radical revision and representation of the African past in ways which not only purge it of imposed European and other foreign remembrances, but which also foreground the relevance of the new reconstructed histories to the present challenges of post-colonial African societies.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the principal force behind this orientation in African film is Ousmane Sembène, whose films, especially “Emitai,” “Ceddo,” and more recently, “Camp de Thiaroye,” constitute some of the most compelling and indeed radical filmic revisions and reinterpretations of history in Africa. Particularly noteworthy in these new film versions of history are:

- a) The recovery and deployment of popular memory to recompose past events.
- b) The radical reconstruction of Euro-Christian as well as Arab-Islamic histories and how these are implicated in African history.
- c) The conflation of Euro-Christianity and Arab-Islam as two sides of

the same colonial coin.

d) The national as well as the pan-African nature and dimension of these histories.

e) The recovery and reconstitution of African women's histories—from a male point of view, of course.

I had wanted to consider these and related issues as well as their modes of representation in "Ceddo," "Emitai," and "Camp de Thiaroye," but because of the limitation of time, I am going to focus only on "Ceddo." I would like to echo here the words of Diali Mamadou Kouyaté, which I have quoted at the beginning, with the words of another noted African elder and intellectual from Mali, whose name is Amadou Hampathé Bâ. Amadou Hampathé Bâ has stated the following:

The fact that it has no system of writing does not in itself deprive Africa of a past or of a body of knowledge. . . Of course, this body of inherited knowledge that is transmitted from the mouth of one generation to the ear of the next may either grow or wither away. . . The African body of knowledge is vast and varied, and it touches on all aspects of life. The "knowledge expert" is never a "specialist" but a generalist. . . The African body of knowledge is thus a *comprehensive* and living knowledge, and that is why the old men who are its last trustees can be compared to vast libraries where multifarious bookshelves are linked to each other by invisible connections which are the essence of the "science of the invisible."²⁹

It was in reference to the urgency of recovering and deploying the knowledge and wisdom of this last generation of great depositories, this living memory of Africa, that Hampathé Bâ made his now canonical statement that in Africa an old person who dies is a library that burns. The filmic reconstruction of history, in the work of Ousmane Sembène, rests solidly on this heritage of oral tradition and memory. From this base, with the true griot as a model, Sembène enters into a battle for history and around history. Official versions of the past, Western as well as Arabic, are contested, revised, and/or rejected, and new, more authentic histories are put in their place.

Sembène's films may partly be seen as undertaking what Teshome Gabriel has labeled "a rescue mission," to the extent to which their recourse to popular memory aims to recover, privilege and articulate the historical significance and the contemporary, as well as future, implications of what official histories insist on erasing. My conception of the notions of popular memory and official history owes a great deal to Teshome Gabriel's elaboration of these concepts:

Official history tends to arrest the future by means of the past. Historians privilege the written word of the text—it serves as their rule of law. It claims a "center" which continuously marginalizes others. In this way its ideology inhibits people from constructing their own history or histories.

Popular memory, on the other hand, considers the past as a political issue. It orders the past not only as a reference point but also as a theme of

struggle. For popular memory, there are no longer any “centers” or “margins,” since the very designations imply that something has been conveniently left out.³⁰

Then, echoing a widely articulated Third World view, Teshome Gabriel has argued that

Popular memory, then, is neither a retreat to some great tradition nor a flight to some imagined “ivory tower,” neither a self-indulgent escapism, nor a desire for the actual “experience” or “content” of the past for its own sake. Rather, it is a “look back to the future,” necessarily dissident and partisan, wedded to constant change.³¹

“Ceddo,” “Emitai,” and “Camp de Thiaroye,” each in its own way, embody the spirit of popular memory. “Ceddo” is a film that re-creates the structures of power and power relations in the nineteenth-century Wolof state of Joloff, on the eve of its demise at the hands of Islam, in competition at times with Christianity and its ally, French commercial and secular power. The privileged point of view in this film is clearly the *ceddo*’s, and it inscribes itself in popular memory. Foregrounding this hitherto repressed point of view results in the explosion by Sembène of a solidly entrenched official version of history of Islam in Senegal. According to this version, Islam is Senegalese. In other versions that concede its non-Senegalese origins, it is posited that Islam’s mode of entry into Senegal was all peaceful. Another aspect of this official version states that Islam was voluntarily espoused by the Senegalese, who were won over by exponents of redemption and salvation. In “Ceddo,” therefore, the term “official” takes on a new meaning, beyond its usual designation of that which is French or French-derived, which is the dominant conception of what is official in Senegal and also in many other African countries. It is no longer a monopoly of the French.

In the same breath, Sembène also enlarges the field of foreign colonial actors in Senegal beyond the French, as is the case in “Emitai” and “Camp de Thiaroye,” to expose the other equally significant and deadly force which has succeeded in passing itself off as Senegalese, namely Islam. Unlike a good number of his fellow Senegalese, who tend to subscribe to Islam’s claim to indigenous antiquity in Senegal, Sembène presents Islam in “Ceddo” as one of the forces—the other being Euro-Christianity, of course—responsible for what Wole Soyinka refers to as “Africa’s enforced cultural and political exocentricity.”³² Customs, beliefs, values, and practices, hitherto presented and taken as Senegalese or African, are examined and shown to be of Arab-Islamic origin by Sembène in “Ceddo.” Moreover, the process by which these Arab-Islamic customs, beliefs, values, and practices came to take root in Senegal is presented as insidious and violent, not unlike the ways in which Euro-Christian slavery, colonialism, and imperialism bulldozed their way into Senegal. Thus, Sembène counteracts the official Senegalese-Islamic version of the West as the sole source of Africa’s cultural contamination and degradation with a new version which splits Islam’s roots away from Senegalese soil, casts Islam as heavily infused with Arab culture, and conflates it with Euro-Christianity. “Ceddo” is therefore the most irreverent rewriting of Islam in Senegal by a Senegalese

artist. It reconstructs its history in Senegal in ways that radically destabilize and undo the dominant Islamic myth espoused by the Muslim elite and their followers, who happen to be the majority of the Senegalese.

In "Ceddo," the image of Islam that is portrayed is not a beautiful one at all. The Muslims are presented as scheming, violent fanatics with little regard for the principles of self-determination and religious and cultural freedom. Their belief in the supremacy of Islam is translated into a series of highly studied moves, which systematically eliminate the rival Christian mission, the traditional secular power structure, and a significant number of the *ceddo* and their belief systems. This project culminates in the establishment of a regime of rule based on principles of Islam, with the imam as the head. The designs of the imam on the society are progressively made clear in the course of the narrative in "Ceddo." His initial litany of verbal attacks on the persistence of pagan practices among the *ceddo* is indirectly pointed at the Wolof secular authority, the King, who is now a convert, yet who tolerates the presence of such infidels, as he calls them, in his society. These attacks become more pointed as the militancy of the Muslims intensifies and as the imam's vow to undertake a jihad against all non-Muslims in the society looms closer to execution. To the King's question as to why the imam never addresses him by the title "King," the imam replies that for him there is only one king, and that king is Allah. To the *ceddo*'s complaint about the growing harassment from the Muslims, and to their question as to whether religion is worth a man's life, the imam, usurping the prerogative and power of the King, shouts blasphemy and renews his threats against them. This attitude defines the relationship of the imam to the society around him, and it sets the stage for embarking on a *jihad* to bring about the rule of Allah. The Muslims burn down the Christian mission and kill the white missionary and the trader, from whom they had obtained their weapons. Next, the news is announced that the King has died from a snake bite; as a consequence the *ceddo* are subdued and forcibly converted to Islam. Into the power vacuum created by the death of the Wolof king steps the imam. Thus, Sembène reconstructs the origin of, and the reasons for, the absence of traditional secular power figures and structures, and the hegemonic status and power of Muslim marabouts and brotherhoods in Senegal today.

In "Ceddo," the imam's ascension to power marks the beginning of what Sembène conveys in the film as one of the most radical and intolerant projects of cultural transformation in Senegalese history. The imam institutes as law most of the spiritual and social conduct hitherto adhered to by only a tiny minority. Among the practices of the *ceddo* that are prohibited under the new Muslim theocracy are the consumption of alcohol, the reproduction of human forms in art, and former modes of worship. The Islamic regime of five daily prayers, the *shahada*, and koranic education become mandatory. The griot of the erstwhile royal court, together with his cronies, is unceremoniously dismissed and replaced by the koran-toting disciples of the imam. The high point of this process of social and cultural change comes in the mass conversion sequence of the film, where the *ceddo* are subdued and submitted to a ritual of purification as a prerequisite for assuming new Muslim identities. They have their heads shaved clean and their *ceddo* names are replaced by new Arab or Arab-derived names, such as

Hadidiatou, Fatoumata, Mamadou, Souleymane, Babacar, and Ousmane. Historical reconstruction in “Ceddo,” then, privileges a non-Muslim perspective, one that is repressed in official accounts of Islam in Senegal. It explores a deeply ingrained myth in Senegalese society. Sembène’s own attitude towards this myth is most graphically defined in the final sequence when Dior Yacine, the princess, heir to the throne, kills the imam with a shotgun, in full view of his disciples and the new converts. Thus Sembène rewrites and represents, in a radically different view, a much neglected aspect of the historical role of women in African history. In “Ceddo,” Princess Dior is posited as a figure of resistance and liberation. The amount of screen time that she occupies in the film is rather limited, and we only hear her voice in relatively few sequences. However, in spite of these physical absences, Princess Dior is the overwhelming presence in the film. The narrative turns and moves around her captivity. And it is she who emerges from her position of royalty—captured royalty nevertheless—to rekindle and put in action the *ceddo* spirit of resistance and refusal of domination. This is captured symbolically in the final sequence of the film which ends—and I put “ends” in quotes here, because the film never actually ends—in a half-shot freeze-frame, with her occupying the larger portion of the screen.

Historical reconstruction, then, in “Ceddo,” aims to explore deeply ingrained myths in Senegalese society. “Ceddo” may be unique in Senegalese artistic perceptions of Islam and the history of Islam, in terms of its tone, its tenor, and its uncompromising view of the religion. But it is indicative of a growing current of thought, both in African literature and in African film. One is reminded of the equally caustic savaging of Islam in Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le devoir de violence*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, and elsewhere in Chancellor Williams’s *The Destruction of Black Civilization*.