

52nd Sydney Film Festival

The struggle against superstition in a West African village

Moolaadé, written and directed by Ousmane Sembène

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the 52nd Sydney Film Festival. Parts one, two, three, four and five were published on July 7, 12, 13, 21 and 25 respectively.

Winner of the *Prix Un Certain Regard* at Cannes in 2004, *Moolaadé* is the second movie in a trilogy by 82-year-old Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène. It is set in a West African village and dramatises the struggle against the ancient practice of female genital mutilation. *Faat Kine*, the first in the trilogy, which has been dedicated by Sembène to the “daily heroism” of ordinary Africans, was released in 2000.

Sembène is a leading figure in African literature and regarded by many as the father of sub-Saharan cinema. From his first feature *The Black Girl from ...* in 1965, about the mistreatment of a young girl who migrates to the Antibes to work as a domestic servant, through to *Moolaadé*, Sembène has consistently explored and encouraged the egalitarian strivings of the oppressed African masses against social injustice and religious bigotry.

Given Sembène’s distinguished career—he has written and directed 13 movies and authored numerous novels—it is astonishing that so little of his work is available on video or DVD in Australia. In fact, *Moolaadé* is the first of his films to secure an Australian theatrical release.

Sembène was born in 1923, the son of a poor fisherman in southern Senegal, then under French colonial rule, and spent his early years in backbreaking manual labour. When World War II broke out in 1939 he was drafted into the French army and later fought with the Free French Forces against the Nazi occupation.

After the war he returned to Senegal, where he worked in the railways and was involved in the 1947 Dakar-Niger rail strike, a turning point in the post-war struggle against French rule in West Africa, and dramatised in his 1962 semi-fictional novel *God’s Bits of Wood*.

Sembène returned to France and worked on the Marseille waterfront, participated in militant strike action and, under the tutelage of the Stalinist French Communist Party, which he joined in 1950, began reading Marx, Lenin and other socialist literature. He opposed the Korean War and campaigned against French colonial rule in Indochina and Algeria.

After he was badly injured in a waterfront accident, Sembène began writing about his personal experiences in a series of novels and short stories, and in 1963 won a scholarship to study film at the Soviet Union’s Gorki Studios.

It is not clear how much influence the reactionary conceptions of Stalinism had on Sembène’s artistic development, but the Soviet bureaucracy’s promotion of African nationalism, and its manoeuvres with the African national bourgeoisie, would certainly have been politically disorienting. Given this writer’s limited exposure to his films, however, it is not possible to make a detailed assessment of his overall artistic output.

Suffice to say, Sembène’s latest film is infused with a powerful humanity and genuine understanding of the issues confronting his protagonists.

Set in a remote Muslim village in contemporary Senegal, *Moolaadé* explores the conflict between the tribal elders and a group of rebellious women over the ancient and barbaric practice of female genital mutilation. The word *moolaadé* refers to an ancient spell of protection.

Female genital mutilation is viewed as a means of “purification” by its practitioners, and is primarily a social not a religious custom. It is still practised in 28 African countries today by Muslims, Christians, Ethiopian Jews, Animists and others. Its purpose is to prevent those mutilated from experiencing sexual pleasure and therefore, supposedly, to guard the sanctity of their future marriages by

removing any possibility of infidelity. This cruel ritual results in the death and crippling injury of many pre-adolescent girls and is the bedrock of the traditional social order depicted in *Moolaadé*.

As Sembène explained to one journalist: “It is very, very difficult to speculate about the origin of female genital mutilation, but ... [i]t is a crime that stems from people’s ignorance and from their fear of confronting the future. It is easier to hide behind past values than to face building one’s future.”

Sembène skillfully recreates day-to-day rural village society, brimming with life and colorful characters on the one hand, and torn apart by sharp social conflicts bubbling under its bucolic veneer, on the other.

Collé, the film’s unlikely heroine and the second wife of a local villager, is thrown into a major clash with the tribal elders, which threatens to undermine long-held traditions. Wonderfully acted by Fatoumata Coulibaly, this spirited mother had managed to protect her own teenage daughter Amsatou (Salimata Traoré) from genital mutilation seven years earlier.

Collé’s husband and other tribal elders begrudgingly, for the sake of stability, tolerated this past transgression but cannot allow her next act of defiance—to harbour four young girls seeking protection from the red-robed Salindana—the women who perform the mutilations.

Collé courageously invokes *moolaadé* to shelter the girls. Such is the popular fear of this ancient spell that the Salindana and the superstitious village elders dare not challenge its power. The resulting tense standoff becomes the thematic basis for exploring aspects of the universal issues of freedom and social justice against religious backwardness.

A fanatical lynch mob from the village, lighting their way through the night with a river of torches, pursues a hapless scapegoat blamed for the *moolaadé* rebellion. This is chilling and resonates with well-known images from America’s Deep South.

Sembène, without resorting to emotional overkill, effectively creates the movie’s conflicts. With limited technical resources—only two cameras were used for the production—the full impact of the drama is generated through a skillful development of the story’s complex and contradictory characters. Dominique Gentil’s cinematography is effective and subtle and Boncana Maiga’s beautiful music is used sparingly. This is a character-driven story in the true sense of the word.

Along with Collé’s opposition to “purification”, other factors begin to undermine the chiefs’ hold over the village. The elders blame portable radios for corrupting the villagers and order them collected and burnt.

Two outsiders, Mercenaire (Dominique Zeida), a dishonorably discharged ex-UN soldier now peddling goods on his cart, and the chieftain’s son, a successful businessman returning from Paris, begin to encroach on the traditional order. While they do not wish to become involved in the “purification” conflict, both men, having experienced life outside Senegal, intervene in different ways to support Collé’s heroic struggle.

Such is the social pressure that Amsatou, Collé’s teenage daughter, also begins to come under pressure to be “purified” so she can marry the chieftain’s son. Her father and other males in the village regard her as a liability and unlikely to ever find a husband from the local area. A heated argument erupts between Amsatou and her mother.

While the young girl resents her mother for possibly thwarting her marriage plans, she admires the older woman’s courage for saving her from “purification”. Unlike Collé, most other mothers in the village are prepared to risk their daughters’ health and well being in order to marry them off.

This leads to a truly harrowing scene with a public flogging of Collé by her husband who has been humiliated by the villager elders. He is spurred on by crazed chants of “tame her” and “hit her”. This, along with another tragic event, provokes a rebellion by a majority of the village women against the elders and the purification practice.

The film’s climax, the final confrontation between Collé and her supporters on the one hand, and the local elders on the other, is rather formal. It lacks the chemistry of earlier sequences, and leads to some rather obvious visual metaphors contrasting religious superstition and the encroachment of new technology.

Despite this, *Moolaadé* has a profound impact on the viewer and constitutes an important and optimistic contribution to the struggle against female genital mutilation. Above all, Sembène demonstrates the power of ordinary people to change their world, even in the face of the most difficult circumstances, and that the struggle against this ancient ritual is bound up with the elimination of poverty—the bulwark of all backwardness and superstition.



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