Classic African films released on DVD: Ousmane Sembène'sBorom Sarret and Black Girl

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Ousmane Sembène, Senegalese author, scenarist and film director, has been making films for over 40 years. New Yorker Video has recently released two of Sembène's earliest and most remarkable cinematic works on DVD: one short film, *Borom Sarret* (1963), and *Black Girl* (1966), which also holds the distinction of being Africa's first feature film.

Born in 1923 in southern Senegal, Sembène, the son of a Muslim fisherman, migrated as a stowaway to France in 1947 to escape the ravages of a war-torn colonial economy. Having joined the French Communist Party in 1950 and the anti-racist movement MOURAP in 1951, he was working as a dock worker in Marseilles in 1960, the year Senegal declared its independence. Within a few years, Sembène had established himself as a novelist and short story writer in France.

On a trip back to Senegal, Sembène was struck by or reminded of the high levels of illiteracy. This convinced him to turn to film rather than literature as a means of communicating with wide layers of the population. In 1962, he enrolled at the Moscow film school, studying under veteran Soviet director Mark Donskoy, and then worked at Gorki film studies under the tutelage of Sergei Gerasimov.

An unusual personality, at this point in his life Sembène combined profound opposition to capitalism and colonialism with a deep feeling for artistic work. He immersed himself in world literature, including the work of left-wing (or former left-wing) writers like Americans Richard Wright, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, the Chilean poet Pablo Néruda, the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, the Jamaican-born, African-American writer Claude McKay and others. He also became involved with the left-wing theater Le Theâtre Rouge.

Under such conditions, Sembène began his filmmaking career, viewing cinema as a means of elevating consciousness, politically and culturally ... as a "liberating art." Following his earliest films, which we discuss below, Sembène continued to look critically at Senegalese society and Western colonialism. For example, his 1974 film *Xala* lambastes the hypocrisy and pride of the African ruling elite, while maintaining a critical stance towards aspects of traditional African society. The short film *Taaw* (1972) centers on an unemployed youth who learns "the bitter truth about the contemporary social order: to survive one has to be a policeman, a paid informer or a Member of Parliament." (P. Vincent Magombe, *The Oxford History of World Cinema*) Similarly in *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*, 1968), a civil servant's daily survival depends on adopting corrupt methods.

After the release of *Mandabi*, Sembène was subjected to a barrage of attacks for exposing the horrific levels of misery in Senegal, and throughout his career he faced governmental criticism and censorship. *Ceddo* (1977), "which reflected the conversion of the Senegalese people to Islam [in the 17th century] and the wretchedness of the political system" (Magombe), was banned by the government for eight years.

Like other African filmmakers, Sembène has not only faced censorship within Africa, but as well from without, particularly from France, which has provided much of the technical and financial resources for the development of cinema in the former French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. Sembène's 1972 film *Emitai*, critical of French colonial rule, was kept out of circulation for five years and then released with a re-edited ending.

The films newly released by New Yorker Video on DVD (contained on one disc), *Borom Sarret* and *Black Girl*, are starkly realistic films that mesmerize by virtue of their poetic quality. Both exemplify the richness made possible when serious art and serious politics encounter one another. They are examples of the sublime artistic treatment of everyday life. The urgency of each image—as though life depended on avoiding the superficial and extraneous—disturbs in the extreme.

Borom Sarret was Sembène's directorial debut upon his return to Senegal in 1963. The film treats a day in the life of an unnamed *borom sarret*—derived from the French phrase "bonhomme charrette"—a horse-driven cart driver for hire, operating in the poor quarters of Dakar. The regular passengers of Sembène's *borom sarret* include people as destitute as he is. ("When is she going to pay me? But she has her troubles too.")

As the day progresses, paying customers begin to hire his services. Stopping for a meager lunch of nuts and burdened with worries about what his family is eating, the wagoner becomes enthralled by a storyteller, or *griot*, singing about tales of ancestral glory. Swept away ("Even if this new life enslaves me, I am still noble"), he hands over his earnings to the charismatic minstrel.

Left desperate by this ill-conceived act, he begins taking riskier fares. This lands him in a wealthy area of the city with its obvious French influence. Here, amid modern high-rises and fancy cars, the horse-drawn carts are not allowed. An arrogant, self-important policeman stops him and hands him a ticket. Forced to sell his cart in order to pay the fine, the cart driver returns home with less than when he left. There is no food for him, his wife, his children or his horse. "I promised you we would eat tonight," his wife says to her children and she leaves with them in tow. His manhood shredded, the wagoner says meekly: "Where is she going? There is nothing to eat." A day in the life of this *borom sarret* has left him with nothing economically or spiritually.

In a 19-minute black and white short, Sembène artfully delivers a world of extreme economic and social oppression. A working class seething in discontent.

An aspect of the oppression explored by the film is its psychological impact on the oppressed: the wagoner's susceptibility to the *griot*; his condescension and lack of sympathy for a deformed beggar ("So many beggars, they are like flies"); a shoeshine boy helplessly allowing a customer to leave without paying; but above all, the wagoner's acceptance of his place in society, his fatalism about his conditions.

What begins as a dichotomy between the braggadocio and exploited life of the wagoner ends with deflated illusions and a political understanding more in line with the harsh reality of Senegal's post-colonialism. While the French colonial overlords have gone, a brutally structured society remains intact. No amount of praying or the invocation of ancestors alters the situation.

A painful lesson learned from being swinishly cheated out of his only means of subsistence—his wagon. "What will I become? It's all a lie! It's the same everywhere ... Who cares about ancestors? I'm broke. It was the same yesterday and the day before that. We all work for nothing. There is nothing left except to die."

Like *Borom Sarret*, Sembène's *Black Girl* is set in the aftermath of Senegal's independence, and explores the relationship between a Senegalese housemaid, Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse Diop) and a French couple (Anne-Marie Jelinek and Robert Fontaine) who employ her. Arriving from Dakar, Diouana is to resume her employment in Antibes, on the French Riviera. In Dakar, before her country's independence, Diouana worked for the French family as a nanny and expects to perform the same duties in France.

Flashbacks show her enthusiasm for the upcoming trip to France as well as the grinding poverty and unemployment she will be leaving behind. Diouana fantasizes about traveling in the European country and visiting fashionable stores. She also leaves behind a resentful boy-friend, obviously an African nationalist, who has a banner painted with portraits of martyred Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. He has no interest in France and its attractions.

Upon Diouana's arrival in Antibes, she discovers that the couple lives in far more modest circumstances than those they enjoyed in Senegal. This translates into a much altered relationship between Diouana and the couple. Looked upon as a servant, the Senegalese girl goes without regular pay or the opportunity to get out of the apartment's cramped confines. Attempting to offset her demeaning treatment, Diouana dresses stylishly while performing her chores—an act that further enrages Madame.

Expected to cook, clean and function as a piece of exotica for dinner guests ("I have never kissed a Negress before!" remarks a visitor), she is barely seen as human, increasingly becoming the target of Madame's frustrations. The latter's continuous refrain is: "Get up you lazy, we are not in Africa!" She even strikes Diouana while the latter is lying down.

A letter from her mother berating Diouana for not sending money is the final disappointment. She disintegrates when Monsieur tries to assuage her by paying her overdue wages. She did not come to France to wear an apron and make money. The soundtrack changes from African to French music. The camera pans a populated Riviera beach. Is this the alternative to a wretched life in Dakar?

Finding everything intolerable, Diouana comes to a tragic end, proclaiming, "I'll never again be a slave!"

With his maid's belongings, Monsieur returns to Dakar. Conspicuously hidden behind sunglasses, he searches a shantytown for Diouana's family. In an act of guilty condescension, Monsieur attempts to compensate Diouana's mother with a cash offering—it would not occur to him to do otherwise. The gesture is rejected.

The movie's final scenes involve Monsieur being driven out of Senegal by Diouana's younger brother, menacingly wearing an African mask. Monsieur departs and the boy is left weeping. The wounds inflicted by Monsieur and Madame are permanent.

Filmed in black and white, *Black Girl* is, at first glance, a study in elegance. Diop's fluid movements and noble comportment are rhythmic and beautiful, further embellished by the film's soundtrack. Critic Manny Farber described the film as "a series of spiritual odysseys: through a kitchen; a ceremonial procedure before the bathtub suicide; a small boy, holding an African mask over his face, following his sister's employer across Dakar; in which the imagination of Ousmane Sembène appears to be covering all the ground that his experience can encompass."

Black Girl's deceptive simplicity is uncompromisingly angry in tone. There are no frills, yet every moment demands consideration. Some of the best currents of international cinema are present: certainly traces of Italian neo-realism, and some elements of Soviet cinema; the film also breathes the same air, although at a higher intellectual-political altitude, as the French New Wave. Despite its elevated place in African cinema, *Black Girl*'s reverberations are anything but Afro-centric.

The African mask functions as the film's main motif. It first appears when Diouana goes to work for the French family in Dakar, a gift from the girl in appreciation for her employment. It respectfully hangs in the home among other local works of art.

In Antibes, the mask becomes a trophy on a stark, cold wall, mirroring the couple's attitude towards Diouana and her isolation in their custody. In one pivotal scene, Madame and Diouana fight over the mask. An overhead camera shot of the women spinning around impersonalizes the fierce antagonism. It is part of a bigger war.

As a genuine piece of antiquity—the "real thing" says Monsieur—the mask is congealed history. Therefore, Diouana's last act is to retake it from those who disrespect its people and their culture. The violence of the tug-of-war "unmasks" its participants, revealing something about the essential nature of victim and victimizer, something of the struggle for power.

Monsieur returns the mask to Diouana's little brother in Dakar, its original owner. This speaks to the failed attempt at subjugating Diouana. The mask chases Monsieur out of Senegal. He appears frightened by the militancy the artifact suggests/incarnates. Behind the mask is the boy's devastated face. How to deal with the loss of Diouana and all her aspirations for a better life? What comes next?

Borom Sarret and *Black Girl* are significant works that continue to merit audiences forty years after their creation. Both films illustrate the power that a successful interplay between ideas and artistic technique brings to the striving for truthfulness. Their stubborn and beautiful chronicling of reality arouses deep feelings—feelings intimately connected to the objective need for social transformation.