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FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AND THE TRIALS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONS IN MOOLADE, A FILM BY OUSMANE SEMBENE

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ABSTRACT

With a great dose of progressive cum revolutionary ideas, Sembene Ousmane in his 2004 film, *Moolaade*, decries the objectification/dehumanization of women by African traditions through obscurantist practices like genital mutilation which consolidate the patriarchal stronghold of traditions on African women. Yet, while Sembene's critique is commendable, it no less runs counter to the author's attempts to assert Africa's unique identity put forth to value the continent and the people. The modern clues in the film extol the tenets of capitalism, thus taking away values that are central in typical (traditional) African communities. This paper argues that *Moolaade* embroils in paradoxes and contradictions that almost nullify the Senegalese cineaste and author's calls for African independence and development such as can be seen in his previous works as well as the apparent message of the film. In short, *Moolaade* inscribes itself in the cluster of films that develop and reinforce clichés about the African continent

Key-words: Excision, femininity, masculinity, modernity, traditions, global.

RESUME

La condition de la femme africaine, sa déshumanisation à travers des pratiques ancestrales obscurantistes comme l'excision, est l'objet du film, *Moolaade* de Sembene Ousmane apparu en 2004. Quoique très bienvenue, cette critique semble ramer à contrecourant des efforts déployés par le producteur en vue de mettre l'autonomisation féminine par le truchement de l'identité ou la personnalité africaine. Dans ce film, Sembene met dans une posture conflictuelle les traditions africaines et la modernité (occidentale) en donnant une place de choix aux éléments culturels de l'Ouest tels que : le radio, l'argent, pour ne citer que ceux-ci, qui desservent l'idée même d'une originalité culturelle africaine étant la voie du salut pour le continent. Cette contribution met en exergue ces contradictions et paradoxes qui foisonnent dans cette œuvre magnifique vouée à l'éclosion d'une ère d'émancipation inclusive en Afrique.

Mots-clés : Excision, fémininité, masculinité, modernité, traditions, global

Introduction

Sembene Ousmane passed away without completing his trilogy in defense of African women; *Faat Kine* in 2001 and *Moolaade* in 2004 are part of a thread of films that the Senegalese writer turned cineaste intended to bulldoze compartments and attitudes that he believes hold women back in 21st-century Africa. The second term of the unfinished trilogy commands attention inasmuch as in it the cineaste grapples with an issue that African feminists (those inside the continent, in the academia as well as abroad) and public health specialists have at all times been the sole addressors.

Female circumcision has always been accounted for on grounds that were not obvious to the rational mind of academics and defenders of the physical integrity of humans. Sembene wonders why the practice is still in currency in Africa: “We are in the year 2004, and the African Union includes 54 countries among which 38 still practice female genital mutilation. Why wouldn’t we cut the tip of men’s penis?”¹²⁰

There are at least three reasons advanced to explain the justness of excision. First, the uncircumcised woman becomes the laughingstock of the village when she opposes the traditional practice; she can even be repudiated by her husband. This is a sociological reason. Mythologies that rationalize the practice abound. For example, for the Mande people (Bambara, Soninke and the Malinke), to rid the girl of her clitoris is to purify her from *nôrô*, a spell that would prevent her to procreate, and thereby reducing her chance of having good offspring for the community. To ensure the stability of the human species, man has to get rid of his femaleness by having his prepuce removed, and likewise the woman’s clitoris must be cut. Secondly, the female genitalia are deemed unaesthetic; to some because they are ugly and dirty. They must be purified. Hence, the excision of the said part. The removal of the unaesthetic part poses a question of aesthetics in excision. Thirdly, excision aims at curbing the libido of the woman and consequently, it renders her faithful to her husband, and thereby honoring the repute of the family into which she is married. This is the psycho-sexual reason behind the practice. However, none of the above reasons not only does not convince Sembene Ousmane but also none makes sense because he wonders why in 21st century-Africa this practice commands currency in a continent where plagues of any kind abound. A considerable African female-authored works is out there to call for a halt to female excision. Political awareness in African countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Togo, to name but a few, has been raised, sometimes accompanied by laws that criminalize the practice.

In Mali, as early as 1994, Cheikh Oumar Cissokho addressed the issue in a movie called *Finzan*, even though Cissokho makes excision one of the many problems faced by women in his native Mali. Medical campaigns are not rare that address the issue both in rural and urban West Africa, if not in most of the old continent. This ring of facts tracing the consciousness developed by the issue prompts questions as to why does Sembene Ousmane address the matter in 2004 with *Moolaade*, as to if this movie contributes to the liberatory discourse in and about Africa or, as to if it merely is an exercise in academically creative sensationalism.

¹²⁰ The original thus reads: “Nous sommes en 2004, l’Union africaine a 54 pays, sur lesquels 38 Etats pratiquent l’excision. Pourquoi? [...]. Pourquoi couper le clitoris de la femme? Pourquoi on ne couperait pas la tête du penis de l’homme?” See *The Making of Moolaade*, the featurette of *Moolaade*, where Sembene Ousmane gives an interview to his biographer, Samba Gadjigo, on a range of issues pertaining to filmmaking in Africa.

Moolaade being first and foremost a creative work, any approach to it must be an aesthetic one that commends the producer for his deployment of genius, inventiveness, and earnestness in dealing with a subject of utmost urgency. While this study acknowledges the importance of the aesthetical though, it chooses to lean more towards the content which deserved much of Sembene's attention and energy. Accordingly, the way African tradition is under fire, the summoning of adverse values like (modernity or modernism, if not western values and outlooks) and the ensuing contradiction inherent in the approach of a defender of authentically African values will be addressed. In other words, female circumcision being the horse of battle of Sembene, it triggers a trail of sociological implications that need to be scrutinized.

I. An Intent of Undermining African Traditions?

Moolaade builds on the dismantling of traditions that run counter to the well-being of the African woman. Elizabeth Lequeret of French radio broadcasting Radio France Inter (RFI) captures Sembene's intentionality in its being woven through the film when she writes, "It is all about a gap between two beliefs. The one has it that an uncircumcised woman is bound to remain husbandless while the other shows the thunder-like power of the "moolaade" when breached, as was the case with the unruly kinglet who was struck dead and whose remains are covered up by the anthill near the palaver tree in the movie."¹²¹ In other words, Lequeret casts back the film into a web of beliefs that are interrelated by way of the sameness of the context from which they all derive.

The context is traditional Africa, which according to Sembene stands as a reactionary machine that grinds any element susceptible to contrast with its grain, the status quo of certain beliefs and privileges that overburden women. Excision, here seems to be an implement of a sexist, patriarchal and misogynous social order that paradoxically employs women to sustain its very foundation. If excision is practiced by women against their budding fellows, it is no less a practice that materializes a social mode of thinking that posits men at the upper hand and women at the suffering end. Sembene's choice of tradition to combat its pernicious components is a very telling technique that shows how determined the octogenarian from Casamance is with regard to the woman issue.

Sembene's literary productions such as *Les bouts de bois de Dieu (God's Bits of Wood)*, *La Femme noire de...*, as well as his film *Emitai* testify to his engagement with issues pertaining to women in Africa. *Emitai* is a motion picture that shows the women-led rebellion of a village against France's demands for food crops (rice) and against forced conscription of African men during World War Two. Whether in films or in literature, Sembene rightly captures the agency of African women. In a 1978 interview with Ulrich Gregor, Sembene confides that until voice is allocated to women in order to facilitate their implication in things African, development will remain a fleeting illusion. He says, "There can be no development in Africa if women are left behind. In modern Africa, women can take part in production, education, but they are still refused the right of speech" (Gregor 36).

The suppression of female voice in all of Sembene's body of work is imputable to men, or social structures orders bearing sexist and misogynistic stamps. In *Moolaade*, the picture is no different. In fact, set in Burkina Faso's Djerisso, a tradition-abiding village, the film plants a setting that prepares the viewer to an environment where opposition between tradition and modernity is sharp at its finest. Elements of tradition include authority, chieftaincy, and the custodianship of traditions in the village. These elements are embodied by men.

The village is under the care of one Dougoutigui (the guardian of the village in Mande language). It has a male notability that meets when a crucial matter arises in the community. These men convene, for instance, when the peace of the village starts getting troubled by Bathily's wife who hosts a group of young girls who flee from their "purification" ceremony, excision. Colle Ardo offers a refuge

¹²¹ The original thus reads: "C'est bien de l'affrontement de deux croyances qu'il s'agit: celle selon laquelle une Bilakoro (fille non excisée, donc fatalement 'impure') ne trouvera pas de mari. L'autre voue à la mort quiconque franchirait sans permission les frontières de la cour: foudroyé d'emblée par le Moolaade, comme le fut en son temps ce roitelet désobéissant dont les restes reposent dans une termitière dressée non loin du baobab à palabres." See Elizabeth Lequeret of French radio broadcasting RFI in "Des femmes et des couteaux." Available at http://www.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/053/article_28040.asp

to the girls, which will lead to a total upheaval in the once peaceful village. Colle's decision to keep the girls in her custody reveals itself as a challenge of African tradition and by the same token, the authority of the men who her decision rather targets.

As mentioned above, the purification of the young girls partakes of maintaining women under men's watchful and panoptic eye for good. A wild woman, i.e., one that escapes the rigor of the knife, means the demise of traditions and of phallic authority in Djerisso. Thus, Colle's refusal to release the girls becomes a "state affair." She poses a threat that is all the more dangerous because she not only re-appropriates the voice that she is denied, but also, she tactfully uses tradition to shield herself against any trespassing by men and their linchpin (the old circumcising women) in the village. As she harbors the girls, Colle barricades herself and the girls with the concept of "moolaade" as if to say, one fights fire with fire:

You see this rope? Do not straddle it unless I say so. As for me, I am bound to host you in compliance with my oath. However, whoever breaches the oath will be struck by the spell of the moolaade.¹²²

Colle artfully strategizes in order to efficiently defeat the centuries-old traditional practice. To the so-called purification, she opposes another traditional practice that literally reduces to naught attempts to get to her fortress. Colle thus deploys her strategy: "Sachez que la purification est une chose, mais le Moolaadé en est une autre" [Remember, excision is one thing, and the moolaade is yet another.] Opposing the "moolaade" to excision pays off because none of the girls falls prey to purification. The little girl whose mother abducts her from Colle's "fortress" falls to the spell of the moolaade. She dies of bleeding after excision.

Vow is important in every culture; its importance arises from the honour, respectability and safety it bestows on the oath-taker as well as the community wherein he or she lives. Vow involves three things that wrap a cloak of sacredness around it. According to Raoul Lonis, this compound of things goes as follows:

A formula of commitment comprising or summing up the clauses of the treaty; a prayer to the gods taken as witnesses; a prayer that calls for curse to befall those who commit perjury. (Lonis 267)¹²³

In some African societies caring for things traditional and where age-old beliefs still command more respect and obsequious observance, it is very much a truth that applies. In the traditional contexts serving as the backdrop of the film, breaching oath means exposure to spell and curse. Men understand this intricacy of the "moolaade"; that's how they force Colle to take back her oath by releasing the girls from her custody. The consequences of such a problem-fraught release are ideological, sociological and religious. Colle understands that backtracking on her words will be construed as a defeat for her revolution in the village. She senses that the womenfolk of the village share her actions even though the latter are not courageous enough to show it. Therefore, Colle is a standard-bearer for them. This is all the more plausible when after the notability of the village fails to have Bathily coerce his wife into rescinding her oath, the men of the village submit the woman to a public flogging. Important still is the reaction of Colle's co-wife and the village women. Khadidiatou strongly discourages Colle to send back the girls in their respective homes:

¹²² Originally, this quotation reads as follows: "Voyez-vous cette corde? Vous ne l'enjamberez qu'avec ma permission. Et quant à moi, je ne peux plus vous bouter de la concession avant la fin de *moolaadé* (Karfa). Cependant, quiconque enfreindra cette règle sera foudroyé par le nyama du Moolaadé."

¹²³ The original thus reads: "une formule d'engagement qui reprend ou résume les clauses du traité ; une invocation à des divinités que l'on prend à témoin ; une imprécation qui appelle la malédiction sur le parjure."

Do not utter any liberating word. It is a great mistake. The moolaade is pitiless. Few years ago, two women died because of it. May God guard you against doing that! Keep the girls under your protection. Do not send them away!¹²⁴

Using tradition Collé's co-wife asserts her stand against excision. She evokes the danger of perjury which is the wrath of the gods as "The strength of the binding nature of a commitment made in these conditions naturally depends on the extent to which one has faith in supernatural forces and in their impact on the life of the believers."¹²⁵ She reminds Colle of being struck by the "moolaade", which has a resonance among the other women of the village who flock in support of their peer, Colle is flogged in public by her husband. The village women, as if singing in a reverse chorus and opposing the whipping as well as the patriarchal order rhyming with it (i.e., the husband ordering: "say it!"), encourage Colle not to recant: "Do not say it!" This chorus is evocative of the alignment of women with Colle despite the passivity characterizing their prior reaction to Colle. She mobilizes a grass-root movement that succeeds in forcing men into discussions about women's conditions. Here, mobilization begins with raising awareness among women. The protagonist of *Moolaade* succeeds, through her perseverance, implicitly involving her co-wife and the womenfolk in her rebellion against the establishment of Djerisso with a bravado not expected of a woman in this context.

II. Modernity as a Way Out of Bondage

Sembene's production sets up a scene witnessing a clash between tradition and modernity. The presence of visual elements representing cultures (Western and African) is so telling that the viewer may be tempted to think that Sembene's film is about antagonism between Africa of a remote past and new and modern Africa. Africa of old is one that lives in complete autarchy; it thrives on tradition; which Paul Gilroy defines as "a closed list of rigid rules that can be applied consciously or attention to particular historical conditions" (Gilroy 13). In other words, in a traditional society, tradition is reified, monolithic, and anticultural or ahistorical. Stuart Hall, in the introduction to the first part titled "Formation of Modernity" of his book, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, provides what he deems the features of a modern society. The latter include the dominance of secular forms of political power and authority, a monetarized exchange economy that builds on the production and consumption of commodities on a large scale for markets, the accumulation of capital and ownership of private property; and the decline of the traditional social order (Hall 8). The decision to be modern seems rooted in Western humanist ideology whereby the terms of oppositional binaries allocate the share of goodness and positiveness to the West and the large share of savagery and barbarity to the rest of the world; i.e., the people and cultures posited as an alterity for the West, its Other.

Modernity, in its applicability in Francophone Africa, comes close to modernism to such an extent that the two terminologies become interchangeable. Abaev Vasilij Inavnovitch teaches us that:

Modernism encompasses all the ranges of culture starting with the philosophy and ending with the dances in vogue. When a given society goes through spiritual crisis, it begins feverishly holding on to everything novel. Because this happens during moments of vacuity and ideological dearth, longing for novelty essentially concerns formality and its attending means, shrewdness

¹²⁴ The original in French: "Ne prononce aucun *Mot libérateur*. C'est un grand risque. Le Moolaadé ne se pardonne pas. Il y a des années ou deux épouses en sont mortes. Que Dieu ne te pousse pas à le faire. Garde les filles ici. Ne les renvoie pas."

¹²⁵ The French original: "La force du sentiment d'obligation que peut susciter un engagement contracté dans ces conditions dépend naturellement du degré d'intensité de la croyance à des puissances surnaturelles et à leur intervention dans la vie des peuples" See Raoul Lonis quotes Victor Martin's *La vie internationale dans la Grèce des cités*, p. 270.

and gymnastics geared towards form. As for content, if existent at all, it remains insignificant and primitive. (Inavnovitch 87)¹²⁶

Here, what is at stake is the mental, spiritual and religious crisis caused in Africa because of modernism. Old ways and practices are pitted against new ones from outside. Modernism means simply a society free from traditional political power and authority, with a secular conception of sovereignty and freedom. Modernism shows itself as the antithesis of traditions because it embodies the Enlightenment conception of culture, of development (high level of refinement in manners known as civilization). To become modern – “être à la mode” or to be fashionable – becomes synonymous with to be civilized and to embrace Western values. Sembene’s film does not escape from this understanding. It embraces the fashionableness embedded in modernism as well as the sense rupture that modernity inspires. Even though “modernity is distinct from fashion,” as Michel Foucault indicates, it no less implies “a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment” (Rabinow 39). *Moolaade* calls into question the course of time – the past as it impacts the present – as well as it assails tradition and the people who stand for it. It blurs the line and turns modernity into modernism and vice versa. In fact, one of the reasons why he shoots *Moolaade* in 2004 is that if female circumcision persists, development be hard to come by because it too needs the contribution of Africa’s female component. Thus, he pits one (tradition) against the other (novelty and modernity).

In order to make his case against the old tradition or practice of purification, Sembene operates on the basis of opposition between traditions and what the present must stand for. This oppositional politics presides over the choice of the setting, the real people and their ways, and Western cultural elements that posit their stark opposition to Africa as it currently is.

Firstly, the location that Sembene ultimately retains for the shooting of *Moolaade* is loaded with both historical and symbolic importance. Historically, Djerisso is located in western Burkina Faso; it is a place where people still live by their age-old traditions. Mud houses, Sudanic-type mosques, ancestral practices like “female purification” or excision, the coexistence of Islam and traditional African religion all show that the village is typically African. When Samba Gadjibo interviews Sembene in the *Making of Moolaade* about the choice of Djérisso, the latter answers as follows:

I could have shot this film elsewhere. However, I was looking for a village meeting my creative standards. I traveled thousands of kilometers. I went to Burkina Faso, to Mali and Guinea-Bissau. When I came to this village, I knew immediately that it was the one. Besides, in the middle of this village there was a unique mosque, one without any outside influence. This explains my choice of Djerisso.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ The French original reads as follows: “Le modernisme [...] embrasse tous les domaines de la culture à commencer par la philosophie ‘à la mode’ pour finir par les danses ‘à la mode’. Le mot ‘modernisme’ est lié par l’étymologie au mot ‘mode’ [...]. Lorsque la société entre dans une phase de crise spirituelle, elle commence à s'accrocher fébrilement à tout ce qui est nouveau. Mais comme cela se produit dans des conditions de vide, d'indigence idéologique, la recherche du nouveau porte essentiellement sur la forme, sur les moyens formels, les procédés formels, les astuces, les acrobaties formelles. Quant au contenu, pour autant qu'il subsiste, il reste des plus pauvres, des plus primitifs. Voilà ce que c'est que le modernisme!”

¹²⁷ The original in French is the following: “J'aurais pu le tourner ailleurs, mais je cherchais un village répondant à mes désirs créatifs. J'ai parcouru des milliers de kilomètres. Je suis allé au Burkina Faso, au Mali et en Guinée-Bissau. Mais en voyant ce village je savais que c'était le village qu'il me fallait! En plus, il y avait au milieu de ce village cette mosquée unique, sans aucune influence extérieure. Voilà pourquoi Djérisso.”

The absence of foreign cultural influence in the village – as Sembene claims –, which is largely arguable because of Islam which is a foreign religion to Africa, makes it a perfect candidate for cultural authenticity. One can only surmise that Islam has come to pass as the bulk of the culture of the village by reason of its centuries-old anchorage in this old part of the Kong kingdom, an Islamic state in present-day Côte d'Ivoire.

Secondly, in the bucolic setting that Djerisso provides, there is an anthill that is shown time and time again. The anthill in the village provides a referent for the story of Yerim Djack, after which the film is named. “Moolaade” means “oath” in Puular. With a traditional concept, Sembene seeks to dismantle traditional beliefs he deemed obscurantist for Africa. The young girls would have been circumcised if it were not for the oath that Colle never attempted to rescind. Her rebellious spirit is comforted by the respect of a traditional belief against a traditional practice that has seen countless women of her kind “purified”, that is to say circumcised.

Thirdly, there is a resort to traditionally communicative means like drums. In fact, the drum is used to welcome Colle’s husband Bathily who has been sent off to gather crops for the village. Upon his return, one can hear some drumbeats. Bathily interprets the beats as the announcement of a loss: “Ils cherchent quelque chose. Et ce n’est pas une affaire de bétails. Ce sont des personnes qu’ils cherchent. Pas une, deux.... Mais six personnes?” [Something has happened. It is not a light matter. They are looking for human beings. Not one, not two...But six of them.]

Sembene draws from the West African drumming culture, which Ivorian social anthropologist researched through the coinage of “drummology.” In Akan culture, the drum announces social events like birth, marriage and death. In his movie, cast in an environment other than the Akan one, the filmmaker goes beyond these three events. The drumming language sends a message about the disappearance of young girls that most people, at least in African communities where drumming is more than entertainment, easily decrypt. Sembene draws from the language of the drums – *drummologie*. Borrowing the English word “drum” and the Greek “logos” Niangoran Bouah, the late Ivorian ethno-sociologist defines his science as being “l’étude et l’utilisation des textes des tambours parleurs africains comme source de documentation pour approfondir les connaissances des sociétés africaines de tradition de la période précoloniale” [the study and utilization of the texts issuing from African talking drums as a source of documentation in order to provide an in-depth knowledge about pre-colonial African societies].¹²⁸

Ultimately, excision itself is a centuries-old practice that constitutes the ultimate traditional element around which *Moolaade* is structured. As mentioned above, the practice builds on a traditional belief that an uncircumcised woman is not only, a “bilakoro” (impure, unprepared to enter adult life), but also, she is seen as someone that may disrupt society by being more sexually carefree and impudent. Egyptian psychologist, novelist, and feminist and activist of women’s right, Nawal El Saadawi aptly encapsulates the ideology behind the practice in her part of Africa:

¹²⁸ The Social anthropologist, who died in March 2002, wrote two books on the subject: *Introduction à la drummologie I – Tambours parleurs* in 1980 and *Introduction à la drummologie II – Djomolo* in 2001. He is quoted by Blandine Bricka and Georges Faudet in “G. Niangoran-Bouah, Père fondateur de la Drummologie,” p. 86.

Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized. This permits a female who has reached the dangerous age of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity, and therefore her honor, with greater ease. Chastity was imposed on male attendants in the female harem by castration which turned them into inoffensive eunuchs. Similarly, female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse. (El-Saadawi, 33)

But above all, an uncircumcised woman actually represents a threat to manhood and the idea of masculinity in currency. Only men possess a protruding sexual organ; women are meant to be a receptacle of the male organ. When uncut, it seems, the clitoris vies with the phallus for virile power. Bourdieu captures very aptly the fear of the loss of virility through competition of sorts that may put a given man in danger. He writes that virility is “an imminently relational concept constructed before and for other men and against femininity because of the fear one feels for the feminine side one has in oneself first and foremost” (Bourdieu 78).¹²⁹ The overemphasis men put on virility is due to their fear of being castrated.

The oppositional dynamics of the film finds its source as much in traditional elements as in items featuring modernism. These include the mass media technologies such as radio and television, money, and migrancy (immigration and emigration).

The producer of *Moolaade* is a champion of contradictions because he is Marxist, and this ideology builds on contradictions in order to actuate social change. Though Sembene appreciates Africans for being who they are (he therefore extols values that have suffered no external influence), he has hard time accepting values that are antisocial, antihistorical and obscurantist. Excision which pins women down is fought in this vein. He not only combats retrograde traditions with traditions, but he also uses modern means that prove to be even more effective.

The characteristic features of modernism in *Moolaade* include, first and foremost, “monetarized exchange economy” as noted by Stuart Hall and mentioned above. Although the village appears to be authentically African because of the country life of its people, modernism knocks at their doors; money – the nerve of the capitalist system – has a marked presence. “Mercenaire”, the crooked itinerant vendor of basic household articles, places money in a place of pride.

For example, he admonishes a lady who knotted a bank note at the end of her wrapper: “On ne torture pas ainsi des billets de banque” [You should not torture a bank note that way!] Besides, Mercenaire is well-informed about global capitalism, and he does not spare Ibrahima his big theories when the latter confronts him about his hiking prices of articles like bread and cloths for women. He takes advantages of villagers and the capitalist system; he enriches himself on the back of the poor. Sembene makes a typical Marxist claim here. However, he draws on another contradiction to make his case for modernism.

In Africa where barter was the mode of economic exchange, he seems to make the case for the very exploitative capitalism that he, the Marxist, so abhors. Upon his return from Paris, Ibrahima brings all sorts of presents and gadgets. He becomes a source of both envy and emulation. In Mercenaire’s quarter Konaté buys a pair of shoes for his young boy whose eyes are riveted on Ibrahima and the bank notes the latter holds in his hand. As if to console his money-bewitched son, Konaté says, “Quand tu

¹²⁹ The original is the following: “[...] une notion éminemment *relationnelle*, construite devant et pour les autres hommes et contre la fémininité, dans une sorte de *peur* du féminin, et d’abord en soi-même.”

seras grand, toi aussi tu iras en France où on fabrique l'argent" [When you grow up, you too will go to France where money is made]. France, and by the same token outside Africa, is the road to success and comfort. Ibrahima is an example that Sembene sets for the youth, who in an attempt to escape poverty becomes prey to the false promises of a better-being overseas. Thus, the film encourages immigration of Africans, which younger writers of African descent like Fatou Diome – one of Sembene's compatriots – find fault with. Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* is an anti-immigration manifesto in that it shows the dark side of emigration in order to avoid Africans' clandestine immigration which causes ravages in families instead of doing them good as expected.¹³⁰ In this wise, *Moolaade* becomes extremely problematic; while addressing a critical issue in women's condition it opens the door to other problem of global intricacy and complexity.

The oppositional mode on which the film operates confers the upper hand to means of modernity over those of the traditional order. For instance, there is a place of pride allocated to radio and television which enter in a competition with the values and traditions that make Djerisso, and by extension, the people of Colle's village. According to Arjun Appadurai, the media creates agency. He notes, "There is growing evidence that the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*. Terrorists modeling themselves on Rambo-like figure [...]; housewives reading romances and soap operas as part of their efforts to construct their own lives [...]" (Appadurai 7). It goes without saying that in *Moolaade* the media carries the potential of turning the powerless rural women into sites of power and agency that will overpower the putatively sexist and patriarchalist social order of the village. Women seem to be fully conscious of this power of technology and do not wait to be asked to use it.

Radio is used very skillfully by women in the film to subvert the patriarchal social order. First, the viewer is given a fresh and knocking sound of a Malinke singer who uses her suave and unrestricted voice to make the way for female opposition to traditions that affect them. The same voice opposing the practice of purification ends the film. The female singer's song is carried through the radio to the village women eager to open up to the outside world (the capital, which is the microcosm of development for them). The singer teaches us that it is written in the Koran that female excision is not allowed. And yet, the village phallocratic order leans on this holy book to substantiate a traditional practice that gives them power over women. No wonder when men realize that the radio (or technology) is their enemy, they ban the use of radio and even television in the village. Thus, a bonfire is made to consume all the radios of village. The following dialogue is evocative of the conspiracy of men against women:

Woman: Sanata, you who know men, do you know why they are confiscating our radios?

Sanata: Our men want to imprison our minds.

Woman: Sanata, how possible is it to imprison our minds? But...how can something that is invisible be imprisoned?

Clearly, Sanata, a woman of loose morals, knows men and what is at stake. The regimentation of women is best done when the village is cleared off radio. The seizing of radios does not prevent women, or Colle, from making the most of it. Her stubbornness brings her co-wife to her side. Backing Colle on the side, Khadidiatou dusts off an old radio and hands it to Colle in order to continue the

¹³⁰ See Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (The Belly of the Atlantic), published in 2003 by Editions Carrière in Paris, France. Diome lays bare the plague of immigration in Africa. This exodus has wreaked a good deal of havoc in African countries in terms of brain drain, and the disillusionment a good deal of young African immigrants are confronted with while being abroad – joblessness and discriminations of all sorts – and the danger of death in high waters.

struggle. On the other hand, the realization of their foul deeds makes men come to grips with the reality of the outside world.

The use of media in *Moolaade* also extends to the television. In fact, the son of the village chief, Birahima, sides with women. He advocates for the use of media in the village. The son from Paris admonishes his father and the latter's peers for barring the way to social advancement:

You cannot forbid these media any longer, because radio and television are fully part of the life of people in the four corners of the world. We cannot afford to remain cut off from the rest of the world.¹³¹

To have a radio and to watch television is to be connected to the world and to be informed. Clearly, media represent development and interconnectedness with the rest of the world, and its rejection is a choice of self-seclusion. The antennas of Ibrahim's television are shown along with the minarets of the mud-made mosque. This scene may be construed as being evocative of the demise of the syncretized Islam that is rife in the village on behalf of modernism. It is Islam, the film seems to show, that is the source of the evil of excision, and as such, it must be put in difficulty by introducing values that will redress the so-called oppressive conditions of women. The presence of the minarets and the antennas in the sky of the village evokes a competition in which the media (modernism) has a clear lead. The end of the film—the position of women is acknowledged as much as it prevails – shows that old ways (tropicalized Islam and local values) have days that are neatly counted.

Ultimately, as if he extinguishes fire with fire, Sembene uses one putatively reactionary element in the village – Islam, which Marxists deem to be the opiate of the people anyways – to combat the patriarchal practice and power structure very well alive in the village. As paradoxical as it seems, the viewer is given a great deal of visuals about the mosques, which is evidently meant to plant the decorum. Being a former Quranic student, Sembene draws on a chapter of the Muslim's Scripture. Chapter 94 (Sûrah Inshirah: "The Expansion") is heard at the beginning of the movie, in the middle and at the end. The verses recited by the Quranic school children read as follows:

Have we not expanded your breast for you?/ And removed from you your burden,/ Which weighed down your back?/ And raised high your fame?/ So verily, with every hardship, there is relief,/ Verily, with every hardship there is relief" (S 94: 1-6).

This recourse to the Quran is all the more important because, for example, the recitation proceeds stressing the last two verses (So verily, with every hardship, there is relief,/ Verily, with every hardship there is relief) while Ibrahim (the villager turned agent of the West and modernity) comes close to the mosques, stares at it from the angle of the anthill representing the concept of the *moolaade*. The verses (even though they belong to a system that Sembene posits as antithetical to the historical unfolding of life) and the *moolaade* (which represents the fatal arm against traditions) all come together with Ibrahim to instigate change in the village as envisioned by Colle, and Sembene Ousmane by extension.

¹³¹ The original thus reads in French : "Vous ne pouvez plus empêcher ces médias, car aujourd'hui dans les quatre coins du monde la radio et la télévision sont partie intégrante des mœurs. Nous ne saurions restés coupés du reste du monde."

Also, the last two verses are expressive of perseverance and patience as being the golden path to success. In other words, the verses encourage to progressive or gradual achievement of one's goal. Here, gradualism is noticeable in Ibrahima and Colle who are the endogenous forces attempting to effect change, though in a gradual way. The son of Dougoutigui, as one realizes, is less frontal and vocal certainly because he understands that change in mindset and perspectives when it comes to such deeply engrained practices as excision needs to be advocated very cautiously.

Unlike Ibrahima, Colle, the other agent of social change, is vocal but within the limits of reason and respect for the male figures who are the warrantors of authority in the village. That local agency is the only way to change in the village is all the more valid that the itinerant and outsider, Mercenaire, who opposes the practice of purification by physically siding with a woman who is beaten by some village elders ends up ground by the powerful patriarchal system of the village; he is taken into the thicket and silenced upon the order of the power that be.

It is worth immediately underlining that *Moolaade* makes the case for modernity as advocated by Africologists or self-appointed experts on Africa who believe that the only way out for Africa is the way into modernity. As Stephen Smith, the French journalist now turned academic opines:

So long as Africans refuse to enter modernity, i.e., being clandestine travelers or people living on the edge of the rest of the world, we will always touch upon the open wounds of Africa with our pens. (Smith 230)¹³²

Should African development be dependent upon the Western humanist ideology that posits the West as the center of the world and the differences in it as evil, negative, useless when they refuse to be subsumed under the homogenizing yoke of the West? Here, the mixing of television antennae with minaret only pretends to evoke a co-existence between modernism and traditions. The truth is that nowhere in the film other traditions are shown, if not under positive light. Revealing the downfall of traditional practices deemed reactionary in the 21st century necessitated the showing of the contradiction that may ensue between traditions and the people of a different time.

The question remains: who do these traditions belong to? How eager are these people to be modern? The fact is that they are never raised in front of the concerned people for the sake of balancing positions bent on showing what these oppressed people want. As well, one is tempted to believe that, notwithstanding Sembene's Marxist obedience, he wants one thing and claims its contrary at the same time. An authentic or genuine Africa in essence cannot be modern in the Western sense. It has to invent its own form of development in order to compete with the rest of the world in this age of globalization, where instead of the homogeneous compact of global village there has to be particular cultures and identities to reveal the diversified beauty of the village. On this the sparing the world of dullness and monotony depends.

¹³² The original in French is the following: "Aussi longtemps que persistera ce refus d'entrer dans la modernité, autrement qu'en passager clandestin ou en consommateur vivant aux crochets du reste du monde, il faudra aviver la blessure, plonger la plume dans les plaies ouvertes de l'Afrique." Smith seems to have been quoted in a word-for-word way by Nicholas Sarkozy, France's former president who delivered a racist speech at Cheikh Anta Diop University on July 26, 2007 in Dakar.

III. Advocacy For Unipolarizing Globalization

Talking about globalization, Jonathan Friedman notes, “The global transformation of capital accumulation is articulated to major reconfigurations of political power in the world, to major dislocations of population, and to the disintegration of microsocial forms of life for many, and to the intensification of both everyday domestic, local, and regional violence” (Friedman xiv). The reconfigurations of power relations, the dislocations of communities, and the intensification of violence that ensue from globalization warrant the argument sustaining that the colossal danger of modernity is its reconfigurative power in the so-called age of globalization.

As Friedman surmises, if “globalization [...] does not mean unification or even integration in any other way than coordination of world markets” which may not be as early as (Friedman 6), it is no less true that the world of markets is representative of the nerve of this world because with monetarized economy Western capitalist nations succeeded in imposing on the world by way of fiercely combating alternative economic cultures such as exemplified by the so-called Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union are living proof of the supremacy of globalization, the highest stage of capitalism. Thus, contemporary globalization, which is nothing but an elaborate and complex form of early globalization, is a danger because it predicates on the homogenization of cultural particularities in the name of belonging to a world where linguistic and cultural barriers are hoped to be leveled down in order to have a global citizenship and a planetary nation.

In the globalized village, as barriers go down the “here-and-there” become mingled and fused, thereby favoring the fading of national specificities that ought to stand for specific cultural identities which lump together to make a diversified global village. Like venom, it slowly but surely infiltrates into the body and kills it.¹³³

In *Moolaade*, globalization agents are Ibrahima, Mercenaire and, of course, money. If Mercenaire is a rural merchant, he is no less the epitome of migrancy and cosmopolitanism. He wanders from one hamlet and village to the other. Through him money becomes alive – he chastises those who crumple bank notes, and by extension those who fail to pay money its due respect. As well, Ibrahima the cosmopolitan plays the role of transmission belt of the capitalist engine in the village. He pays debts, and keeps Mercenaire’s business thriving. As noticed above, money is the measure of man in the village. Ibrahima’s presence inspires emulation as well as it creates a sense of pride in his family.

The mobility of specific cultural agents, like Ibrahima, is not synonymous with the loss of cultural identity that the individual apt for migrancy carries. It should rather show as a gain of additional identities. While the migrancy of Ibrahima partakes in human understanding and coexistence in general, specifically it clearly gives the impression that this man stands against anything traditionally African. Migrant and product of world citizenship of sorts, or a cosmopolitan (one that distances oneself from one’s place of origin and occupying a position of other in another space), Ibrahima once was like his parents of the village. The trip to the West completely metamorphoses him. Not only does he find preposterous, ridiculous and useless to thwart the breakthrough of media in the lives of the villagers, but he opposes the purification of young girls, which in his now Westernized eyes is barbaric. He now opposes arranged marriage; he raises his voice against his father. It is clear that immigration, an offshoot

¹³³ This is the position of Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron in “Killing Me Softly: Violence, Globalization, and the Apparent State” in the book edited by Jonathan Friedman. See *Globalization, the State and Violence*, pp. 203-248.

of migrancy, brings about disintegration. The prime example is Ibrahima. Colle is a “phallic woman”¹³⁴ one who, though purified behaves like a man. In fact, she induces the collapse of the patriarchal order. More importantly, it is the person who pushes Ibrahima into the anti-patriarchal alliance. He brings a television in his father’s house – the chief and moral warrantor of the village – as if to start the subversion at the head of the evil. If he had not gone abroad, he would have been in the same bandwagon as the other men of the village. Therefore, Ibrahima, an unambiguous agent of globalizing forces – neo-imperial powers –, globalizes the local. The inevitable consequence of this is a reverse process whereby the local becomes one with the global, thereby embracing it. The victory of Colle and the womenfolk reads as their alignment with “forces of progress” and modernity, warranting the thought that we are in the presence of an indictment of local cultures and practices on behalf of ways that are extraneous to the village.

Admittedly, we are “entering a new kind of world” (Friedman, 6), unlike Friedman believes. In order to survive in this new world, modernity will have to be localized. If modernity (which may be justifiably interchanged with globalization considering its Western hegemonic nature) is vernacularized or indigenized – i.e. rewritten by the Natives, the exploited and subjugated in order to include it and make it appear as less of a concession to “globalist” and trans-national policies. In other words, if globalization is localized, it will be less of a threat than a deliberate espousal of world economic process with bearing on local cultures and political practices –, it will be welcomed in Africa and most Third World countries. For in this new age, novelties are better accepted when they are freely embraced than forced upon. For, the large-scale private ownership of property coming with globalization dehumanizes the world.

As Don Slater aptly notes, “While liberal modernity regards this objectification and appropriation of the world as ‘other’ in terms of the march of progress, others regard it as a pathological alienation of humanity from its own being and its own world” (Slater, 102). The reification of the individual, and by extension the community, is a threat to the African understanding of humanity. If modernity leads to the disembodiment of the human and “thingify”¹³⁵ him or her, it undoubtedly is an anti-value that the continent and its people must do without.

Conclusion

From what precedes, it ought to be acknowledged that Sembene has a sense of mission informed by his concern for the community, and chiefly the weakling in its midst. Here, the weak people are the women of Africa, who are believed to be persecuted, oppressed and marginalized by a social order that is essentially sexist, misogynous and a hindrance for women’s freedom. Although the film is not merely about excision, which has been fairly shown, the truth remains that *Moolaade* is essentially a defense of women that bleed to save masculinity and virility’s face in a world where its survival seems to be in jeopardy. The viewer also notices, after some African women have already spearheaded the battle for the eradication of female genital mutilation, and where laws have been passed in a number of countries in Africa, that in 2004 the Senegalese cineaste tends to rather be addressing the issue upon the impulse of Western fund purveyors for African film. Also, he buys into the cheap clichés that some feminists in North America used to achieve visibility in academia. Hanny Lightfoot-Klein produced a trilogy that

¹³⁴ I borrow this term from *Refus de la femme*, the French translation of Karl Stern’s *The Flight from Woman*. “Les femmes phallics sont agressives et tendent à la rivalité, à la cruauté sadique lorsqu’elles se vengent; elles caricaturent en esprit la ‘masculinité’” (Stern 30).

¹³⁵ This verb is borrowed from Aime Cesaire who uses the word “chosification” deriving from the verb “chosifier” (thingify). It simply means bestowing the character of a thing to a human being, or depersonifying him or her. See Cesaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*.

addresses the issues in Africa: *Prisoners of Rituals* (1989), *A Woman's Odyssey Into Africa: Tracks Across a Life* (1992), *Secret Wounds* (2003). Alice Walker makes a thunder out of the subject with *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993) to show how savage African traditions are.

Not only this weakens the celebrated cineaste's perspective and combat at large, it also shows that too much agency is attributed to filmmaking. That's why one may side with Ivoirian cineaste, Kitia Touré in believing that African cineastes are just another kind of merchants of dreams. He thinks, "African cineastes make a mistake as far as struggle is concerned. When they make movies, they believe that they are people's guide whereas we are just artists and dream-sellers" (Barlet 113).¹³⁶

Sembene needs to liberate himself from Eurocentric perspectives and ethics on issues African in order to espouse a vision of Africa fit for an underdeveloped nation. While he closes the door on the face of pessimism, his approach to issues is fairly Eurocentric to the point where accusations of him fishing into a pond of clichés on Africa seem utterly warranted.¹³⁷ On the matter of defending the cause of women, there is this thought for African artists like Sembene to reflect upon: "Today, there is only one way to be a male feminist. It consists in remaining silent on the subject of femininity, letting women speak for themselves" (Groult 11).¹³⁸

Ultimately, if *Moolaade* is a critique of capitalism that labors for better-being for Africans, the characterization of Ibrahima defeats this purpose. More than modernizing Africa, the kind of capitalism that Ibrahima embodies paves the way for the continent's being at the mercy of the outside world, which in no way is an appeal to self-seclusion or a failure to recognize human life as culture. In other words, there is no authentic African culture, even though Africans are recognized by a set of values that are distinctively theirs. The truth of the matter is that in the past, capitalism in Africa was ushered in by the West; now it is the Chinese that are rushing in, in the name of globalization, to get their share of the African pie. The things of value that Ibrahima brings from outside seem to imply that capitalism is tied to Africans' happiness, which forces villagers into the web of capitalist economy without their knowing and necessarily wanting it. As for the supposed oppressed women of Africa, history has shown in countless instances that they can help themselves instead of the artistic engagement of some African females and males at the service of the world outside. A counter-modernity strategy is an imperative both in order to hold on what one deems one's identity and to be part of the world at the same time.

¹³⁶ The original is the following : "les cinéastes africains se trompent de combat car quand ils font des films, ils se prennent pour des guides du peuple alors que nous ne sommes que des créateurs et des vendeurs de rêve."

¹³⁷ Of course, the point is not about extolling African traditional values without questioning the obscurantist part in them as Gabriel advises to refrain from in the following statement in his article titled "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films": "It needs to be stressed that there is a danger of falling into the trap of exalting traditional virtues and racialising culture without at the same time condemning faults. To accept totally the values of Third World traditional cultures without simultaneously stamping out the regressive elements can only lead to 'a blind alley' [...] and falsification of the true nature of culture as an act or agent of liberation" (Gabriel 72).

¹³⁸ The French original is the following: "Il n'y a qu'une manière d'être féministe aujourd'hui pour un homme, c'est de se taire enfin sur la féminité. C'est de laisser parler les femmes."

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