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Ousmane Sembene’s Hall of Men: (En)Gendering Everyday Heroism

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ABSTRACT

_Faat Kiné_ (2000) and _Moolaade_ (2004) have together generated remarkable critical attention with regard to the place of women in Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene’s filmography. While numerous film critics and theorists see Sembene as a veritable torchbearer for African feminism, they have not sufficiently attended to the role men play in these final films. In order to contribute a more comprehensive feminist interpretation of these films, in this article I expose the complex web of power relations in which women’s issues are embedded and show how the patriarchal grip risks thwarting plural expressions of both femininity and masculinity. I further demonstrate how female characters and their issues in _Faat Kiné_ and _Moolaade_ enable Sembene to unveil male characters that lay claim to novel paradigms of masculinities, no longer shackled to the colonial narrative of the past but rather anchored in the practice of their material experience of the everyday.

Senegalese filmmaker Sembene Ousmane had been determined over the length of his career to launch a Pan-African film that would pay homage to the spirit of Samory Touré, in particular to show how this African leader had successfully fought off European encroachment over a period of fifteen years. Sadly, the sudden passing of the filmmaker in 2007 interrupted this project. On the occasion of the national homage to Sembene Ousmane at the Place de Souvenir in Dakar on 9 June 2008, the president of the Republic of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, following a laudatory speech on the filmmaker’s revolutionary ideas and pride of Afrocentrism, committed an endowment of 3 billion CFA (approximately $US734,143) from his personal fund to the production of _Samory Toure_. President Wade’s gesture spawned divided reactions. Some of these reactions had little to do with the specific film chosen. Guests were shocked to discover that the president...
was in possession of a private fund, given that 65.3% of the population struggles in untenable living conditions (Fall 21). In the cultural camp, the president of Senegal’s filmmaker association, Cheikh Ngaïdo Bâ, appeared confused by the gesture. From Cheikh Ngaïdo’s perspective, the president was, on the one hand, prepared to provide half of the sum necessary to honor what had been Sembene’s life-long film project, but, on the other hand, had taken no initiatives to ensure the broader survival of the Senegalese film industry, including for example the construction of cinema houses, famously lacking in the city of Dakar (Niane 10). Others were more specifically bemused that the president had bypassed Sembene’s unrealized film, *The Brotherhood of Rats (La confrérie des rats)* in favor of an historical narrative (*Samory Touré*) in which an African man had risen up against colonialism in the nineteenth century. As yet another unfinished film project in Sembene’s more recent triptych, titled “Everyday Heroism” ‘l’héroïsme au quotidien,’ *The Brotherhood of Rats* exposes a story of corruption within the judicial system in contemporary Dakar, an indirect indictment of the current president’s administration.

The fact that the State privileges certain cultural projects over others is not a unique situation. Sembene’s filmography has had its share of both support and dissension in previous administrations. *Xala* (1975) and *Ceddo* (1976) each encountered controversy during Léopold Sédar Senghor’s presidency: the former a direct attack on the neocolonial practices of that time, the latter the result of a linguistic battle—“La querelle du D’”: Cedo (Senghor) versus Ceddo (Sembene) in *Ceddo.* For our interests here—Wade’s reaction is telling of persistent State influence on cultural production.

What the president’s gesture should not obscure, however, is the matter of everyday heroism on which Sembene’s final films insist. The president’s heightened interest in the narrative of an African hero obliges the critic to inquire after the emphasis that the filmmaker himself placed on everyday heroism in his final films, *Faat Kiné* and *Moolaade.* Departing from the master narratives of Africa’s historical past, militant anticolonial and neocolonial denunciations, and moving toward an increasing focus on the legacy of history in contemporary issues within African societies, Sembene’s final films recognize transformations that are taking place locally. “Locally” in this context suggests shifting away from the Africa-versus-Europe paradigm and instead embracing a mode of thinking in which specific developments in African societies reflect new ways of conceptualizing other African nations. To borrow the critic Jude Akudinobi’s words, the notion of everyday heroism brings together the familiar, regular and even the banal with the “remarkably exceptional, [which] emerges from a deep-seated, pro-active well-spring . . . defined by ideals” (181). In this article, I explore how the cineaste’s “everyday heroism” is crystallized in the male-female dynamics in *Faat Kiné* and *Moolaade.* I am particularly interested in how the representations of male characters in these final films indicate a shift in Sembene’s filmography that proposes new models of masculinity within African societies.

Most critics focus on *Faat Kiné* (2000) and *Moolaade* (2004) through the lens of earlier scholarship on the place of women in Sembene’s filmography. For many, then, Sembene is from the beginning a veritable torchbearer for African feminism. Whether illustrating how it is incumbent on her to leave the home to find a means by which to feed her child (*Borom Sarret*) or take action to eliminate the imam
who dares to impose the Muslim religion on her people (Princess Dior in Ceddo), there is little doubt that Sembene consistently represents female characters as active participants, integral to the shaping of African reality. Schooled in Marxist ideology, he has maintained that “[l]’Afrique ne se développera pas sans la participation concrète de la femme” ‘Africa will never develop without the concrete participation of the woman’ (Gadjigo, Dialogues 99).

The “Sembene as feminist” theme is well developed and continues in the criticism of his latest work. Faat-Kiné, for example, is seen in superlatives:

_Faat Kiné_ stands out as the most hopeful, the most restorative and the most beautifully crafted story Ousmane Sembene has ever told about the changing roles of women in Senegalese society . . . _Faat Kiné_ could be regarded as a defining text of what ‘feminism’ could mean in 21st-century Africa. (Gadjigo)

Indeed, Gadjigo uses the example of the Senegalese women in this film to point to the advent of a new brand of feminism for Africa. Akudinobi analyzes both films as examples of how Sembene’s oeuvre grants “African feminism a legitimacy of its own” (177). In line with her fellow critics, Valérie Orlando uses the notion of Africana womanism to anchor _Faat Kiné_’s narrative into a specifically African reality (213). Further attempting to nuance the complex movement of Sembene’s camera and its relationship to issues of gender and power, American film critic Ray Pride remarks: “Sembene has created some of the most indelible portraits of womanhood in the cinema anywhere over the last 40 years,” an assertion that inspired his article’s title “Women Is the Future of Man: Ousmane Sembene on Moolaade” (Pride Cinemascope 21).

To be sure, Sembene’s earlier literary and filmic productions (_God’s Bits of Wood, Borom Sarret, Ceddo, Emitai, Xala_, to name but a few) had already been invested in representing the roles African women play in shifting the socioeconomic and political landscape of Africa. The disproportionate representations of female characters that have been called to action, both in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in Sembene’s narratives have given critics cause to suggest that these depictions create problematic binary representations between “strong, revolutionary ‘masculine’ women and villainous, weak, ‘feminine’ men” (Mushengyezi 1). For Deborah Popkin, the binary is legible: “Sembene’s male characters are often wooden and ineffectual, his female characters are well-defined, varied and true to life” (34). David Murphy, who has examined the roles of mothers, daughters, and prostitutes in the cineaste’s earlier work, celebrates the author for his “array of radical young women” (136) but concedes that Sembene’s “conception of women’s roles in society does rest in part in his disappointments with the men of his generation” (2000, 150). (The representations of the male characters Sergeant-Major Diatta and Pierre Henri Thioune are notable exceptions.) While Murphy rightfully cautions that the gender distinction should not diminish the importance of the emancipation of African women to Sembene’s overall project, the potential risk of romanticizing the figure of the African woman (in her many forms) to the detriment of her male counterpart remains.

Therefore, the new phase that I see at work in _Faat Kiné_ and _Moolaade_ continues Sembene’s ideological investment in the role that women play in transforming society but enlarges this vision to include male characters as complementary
participants in effecting these changes. In this way, the hasty binary accusations of some of the cineaste’s previous works are challenged by multiple and complex narrative representations of gender relations between men and women in contemporary Africa. This shift in optic, moreover, makes clear that it is through the prism of a feminist vision that Sembene is able to finally envision male characters equally invested in a twenty-first-century vision of Africa. The projection of Africa on the screen no longer devotes its energies to wrestling with its historical relations with the West. The Africa upon which Sembene’s lens is focused in his final films has finally heeded the words of his male protagonist, Pierre Henri Thioune, in Guelwaar (1992): “It is true that here in our country we have had our problems. We have our problems but we should be dealing with them ourselves. Not someone else. We, on our own.” This vision of Africa assumes its history and is moving forward in the practice of everyday heroism.

Combining the reception of “Sembene, the African feminist” with a detailed inquiry into the interpretation of everyday heroism in contemporary West Africa shows that the filmmaker exposes women’s concerns to mobilize change in contemporary society as it configures new visions and ideals not only of women, but also of men. In other words, examining closely the material conditions in which women are called upon to lay claim to their distinct expressions of femininity allows Sembene to point to equally diverse representations of African men and their masculinities. Thus far, the criticism of Faat Kiné and Moolaade, focusing on “Sembene the feminist” has too often simplified the complex web of power relations in which women’s issues are embedded. These readings are indeed understandable because of the dualistic mode of thinking that has characterized so much of African cultural production, and Sembene’s work in particular. Yet, as Obioma Nnaemeka points out with regard to the African cultural context, “oppositional binaries such as tradition/modern, male/female, agent/ victim” risk foreclosing precisely the complex representations that these cultural products aim to reveal. Terms like “complementarity” and “relatedness,” for example, blur these neat categories in ways that challenge facile readings of gender relations (Nnaemeka 2–3). If we are to concede to a more comprehensive feminist vision in Faat Kiné and Moolaade, it is equally important to recognize that the practice of feminism that is deployed in these films is explicitly critical of patriarchal ideology distinct from the multiple representations of masculinity and femininity. The inherent distinction between patriarchy and femininity is legible in that we readily identify as the opposing camps—male versus female. Patriotry must, however, also be distinguished from masculinities since the former lays claims to an immutable atemporal naturalized male domination. Masculinity like femininity, on the other hand, is concerned with behavioral patterns that are local and fluctuate over time. This distinction between patriarchy and plural masculinities and femininities opens up new avenues by which to more subtly interpret the male characters in Sembene’s films.

In depicting what I call Sembene’s hall of men, this article examines the male characters of Jean Guèye and Djib in Faat Kiné, who mark a turning point in Sembene’s vision of men in contemporary Senegal. Turning then to Moolaade, I show that Ciré, Mercenaire, and Ibrahima, in actions and words, together fragment on an even broader level the false solidarity and unidimensional representation of a purported singular African masculinity.
“MORALLY BEAUTIFUL” MEN IN *FAAT-KINÉ*

*Faat Kiné* tells the story of a financially successful single mother who takes on the combined role of caregiver and provider for her mother and children. The portrayal of the eponymous heroine announces a new face for contemporary Senegal, one that is proactive and engaged with the material concerns of the present and forging an alternative future. The multiple trajectories of the different characters suggest a dynamic vision of Senegalese society. Kiné’s personal story and life choices are contrasted with those of her two close female friends. These are counterbalanced by the narratives of three male figures, Professor Gaye, Boubacar Omar Payane (alias “Bop”), and Jean Guèye, each representative of different points in Kiné’s emotional life. Structurally, we will see that the filmmaker relies on the key female protagonist’s story—indeed, single mother—to illuminate different representations of masculinity and show how these complement the needs of his heroine in contemporary Senegal.

The flashbacks of the female protagonist’s past recount how she was abandoned by both her former philosophy professor, Professor Gaye (Abý’s father), and her subsequent lover, Boubacar Omar Payane (“Bop,” Djib’s father). In the first instance, Professor Gaye, a practicing Muslim, could have married Kiné and taken on the joint care of their child in a polygamous arrangement. He chooses to dismiss the pregnancy as hers to bear alone. Bop, on the other hand, promises marriage and a new home, which he takes Kiné to visit while she is pregnant with their son, Djib. Encouraged by his taking responsibility for the child and professed love for her, she writes him a check to complete the purchase of their new villa. His personal ambitions and deceit are eventually unmasked when the authorities capture him on his attempt to use false papers to flee both Dakar and Kiné. Samba Gadjigo, Valérie Orlando, and Kenneth Harrow have rightfully lauded Kiné’s courage and determination to raise her children single-handedly. Still, by so doing, these critics reinforce the vision of Sembene’s feminism set up by earlier criticism, that is—strong, courageous, active women and bad, passive, weak men. The repetition of this brand of feminist criticism eclipses the importance of new male figures in Sembene’s work, among whom is Jean Guèye.

While critics give much attention to the gallery of real-life Pan-African heroes of the past (Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, and Nelson Mandela) that decorate Kiné’s home to map out Sembene’s Pan-African ideology, little is made of the determination and courage that Sembene’s male character Jean Guèye represents. A widower, Jean is a modern man in his own right who as caregiver has raised his children alone (“un père exemplaire”) and is regarded as a well-respected entrepreneur in the community. Much like Kiné, he is attentive to the strains of extreme deprivation that afflict everyday life in Dakar and lends a helping hand wherever he can. On one occasion, he even comes to the rescue of Kiné’s former lover, Bop, who is discovered homeless and in need of decent attire. He has ensured that his children succeeded in school and is pleased to join in the festivities arranged by the heroine to celebrate her children’s scholastic achievements. Jean highlights a new model of masculinity not only for Kiné, but also for Senegal, one that Kiné’s son, Djib, proudly defends. In Djib’s words: “Tonton Jean n’est pas un homme de surface. Il est tout en profondeur avec une richesse intérieure” ‘Uncle Jean is not a man of appearances. He
is a man of substance.’ Aby and Djib, Kiné’s children, can only imagine someone of Jean’s caliber and qualities to complement the fiery spirit and self-possessed woman that their mother represents. Religious differences are set aside (Jean is Catholic, Kiné, Muslim) because as Djib points out, “il est beau moralement” ‘he is morally beautiful.’

It is useful to return to a few cases from earlier films that help us to see how new this model of masculinity is to Sembene’s oeuvre. Djib’s expression “morally beautiful” calls to mind the male characters Sergeant-Major Diatta and Pierre Henri Thioune in Sembene’s earlier filmography, characters who can each be read as precursors to the profile of Jean Guèye in Faat Kiné. In Camp de Thiaroye (1988), Sergeant Diatta, through his joint cultural and political allegiances to France and Senegal, demonstrates remarkable confidence in the expression of his masculinity. A former tirailleur and high-ranking officer who served on behalf of France, he is a cultivated man who enjoys classical music and French literature but remains profoundly devoted to his Senegalese compatriots who, under his surveillance, must be treated fairly and equitably by the French authorities. Even after he learns that white European soldiers killed his parents, the news does not interfere with his ability to negotiate his relations with the French or impede his communications with his European wife and daughter who remain in France. It is his ethical compass alone that guides his political and personal choices. Sadly, Sergeant Diatta’s death, along with his compatriots at the end of the film, heeds to a larger historical narrative between France and the tirailleurs Senegalais that does not leave room to explore his brand of masculinity beyond the confines of the camp at Thiaroye.

In Guelwaar (1992), we find an early yet incomplete ordinary hero after whom the film is named. As its hero, Pierre Henri Thioune is remembered in Sembene’s filmography for his dramatic denunciation of foreign assistance. He demonstrates that the hand that remains open to accepting foreign aid cannot point to a new direction. Guelwaar invokes ancestral wisdom to forewarn his people: “If you want to kill a proud man, supply all his everyday needs and you will make him a slave.” The profile of Jean Guèye as seen in Faat Kiné finally rewards Guelwaar’s vision of an Africa working on healing itself. Eight years later, Jean recuperates the pride of the Senegalese man. Whereas Pierre Henri Thioune’s pronouncements cost him his life, Jean, in present-day Dakar, is an everyday hero who lives by following his personal convictions and resolves to attend independently to the needs of his family and his country.

In this respect the expression “morally beautiful” designates a new kind of African male figure in Sembene’s Faat Kiné. Given the investment the filmmaker has made in exposing morally bankrupt political systems through male characters, who mirror images of the political structures they defend, the profile of Jean Guèye marks a decidedly new portrait in Sembene’s gallery of men. Where previous male characters were plagued with myriad forms of impotence and ridiculed (Borom Sarret, Ibrahima Dieng, El Hadji) or killed for their personal convictions (Sergeant Diatta and Pierre Henri Thioune), Jean ably manages his domestic affairs and services the infrastructure of postindependent Dakar. Unlike Kiné’s former suitor, Professor Gaye, who calculates the potential advantage of taking on Kiné as another wife given her socioeconomic success, Jean’s pursuit of Kiné is born out of admiration for her fortitude and spirit of independence. This Senegalese
man pursues a partnership as her equal. He respects the terms and the pace with which Kiné wishes to proceed and indeed follows her lead.

When in the privacy of Kiné’s room, she sits and opens her legs and her arms to him, it is clear that this is the model of a man that she can fully embrace. Kiné’s gesture highlights a markedly different time than that observed between Pierre Henri Thioune and his wife, who, only upon her husband’s death, finally understood the significance of his refusal of foreign aid. The camera alternates between Kiné and Jean as they exchange gazes of mutual recognition. Everyday heroism is demonstrated, in this moment, not as limited to separate trajectories of exceptional autonomy in the public sphere but open to the potential to explore intimate spaces in which familiar acts yield new shared ideals. Jean can come to Kiné as he is, and vice versa. In a script taxed by recriminations, the silence that marks this final scene is triumphant, confirming the filmmaker’s approval of their union.

Sembene establishes a filial and fraternal alliance between Jean and Djib not only through his express approval of Jean’s qualities as complementary to those of his mother, but also in the way Jean’s character bolsters Djib’s expression of his own masculinity. In the character portrayal of Kiné’s son, Sembene elaborates on the significance of the “morally beautiful” Jean and points to the way in which this particular embodiment of masculinity can inform and shape young Senegalese men. With Djib, the filmmaker goes even further than what we see in Jean. He shows how male paradigms in their multiple forms can also be particularized to integrate the female narratives that inform the specificity of their masculinity. Refusing to acknowledge the place of his biological father on the august occasion that marks his academic success, Djib attests to the ways in which Kiné’s personal trajectory and that of Mamie (Kiné’s mother) have influenced the man that he has become and the choices that he feels able to advance. Opposing his biological father’s solicitations for recognition, he exclaims: “Je dois tout à ma mère” ‘I owe everything to my mother.’ “Mother” here defines the co-parenting relationship between Kiné and Mamie who have been critical to shaping his masculinity. Standing before the guests at the party who include his mother’s former lovers (both Aby’s and Djib’s fathers) and Jean, Djib further professes his admiration for the young woman that Kiné was during his youth, a woman who forged her own path towards autonomy by actively claiming responsibility for her life and choices. Admitting to the confusion he experienced as a child in his relationship with Kiné, who he then understood to be his sister, Djib reinforces his argument that it was her conduct and the qualities that it revealed that served as a model for the person he has become. In other words, it was not her designation as his mother that came to shape his own behavior but rather the qualities she espoused that he hoped to emulate.

In his analysis of the gender roles in Faat Kiné, Harrow insists on Djib’s sobriquet, “Presi” (short for president), to suggest that the filmmaker not only situates this male character so that “the next generation will be led by Kiné’s son,” but that his role in particular restores the conventional male-female positions: the woman returns to the domestic sphere and the man (in this case Djib) enjoys social mobility (Harrow 102). Harrow also notes that Djib is a motivating force for his elder sister Aby as seen by how much he encourages her to pursue her aspirations, including joining him at university. Harrow fails, however, to acknowledge that the tenets of patriarchy are distinct from novel articulations of masculinities
in which the qualities of sisters, mothers, and grandmothers are recognized and underscored as integral to determining male conduct.

It is through the representation of Djib that Sembene shows that multiple and generational permutations of femininity (Aby, his sister, Kiné, his mother, and Mamie, his grandmother) can complement and shape the making of everyday heroes, male and female. Jean and Djib in Faat Kiné do not charge onto a battlefield to pursue the enemy (following the previous Africa versus Europe paradigm) but in rather subtle ways carve out individual choices within the context of the familiar that yield exceptional masculine profiles. Sembene, moreover, endorses men like Jean and Djib who can match the courage of his heroine. By mapping out patterns of complementarity and relatedness, Sembene envisions a shared space between men and women, which casts aside oppositional discourses that thwart new potentials for African societies like Senegal.

THE “MAKING OF” EVERYDAY HEROES IN MOOLAADE

The recipient of the Cannes Film Festival’s Un certain regard award in 2004, Sembene’s final film, Moolaade, addresses the broader issue of the sustained practice of female circumcision in rural areas of Africa. Determined to protect four prepubescent girls from female circumcision, the key female protagonist Collé stands up to the Salindana (female practitioners of female gender mutilation) as well as to the larger patriarchal order represented by the Elders. Collé’s determination to protect these young girls marks the occasion to formally defend an expression of femininity that sets her apart from the other women in her village, including the co-wives in her compound. Her conduct eventually offers courage and voice to other women’s visions in the village and, significantly, to key male characters.

The subject of Moolaade lends itself more readily to a dichotomous interpretation in which opposing camps separate men from women, victims from agents, in defense of the traditional practice of female excision. The film is set in a rural region of Burkina Faso. The Salindana sit neatly alongside the male elders within a patriarchal order that mutilates the female body by cutting her genitalia to curb her sexuality and thus control her conduct. Collé represents the moolaade, that is, the manifest protection of the female body from this purported “purification practice” that refuses to take into account the physiological and psychological consequences for young girls and women. In addition to her near-death experience at the hands of the Salindana, Collé has suffered the loss of two children and she is reminded on a daily basis that it is impossible for her to enjoy sexual intimacy with her husband. Collé’s position is clear. Her only surviving daughter will not endure a similar fate nor will any other young girl who seeks her protection. The four young girls who escape the Salindana are thus in safety within the confines of Collé’s quarters. In order for the Salindana to gain access to these young girls’ bodies, Collé must utter specific words to remove her protection of them. To bring this about, the Salindana and the elders call upon Collé’s husband, Ciré, to act as a man and head of his household. He must beat Collé publicly and force her to remove the protection.

Surrounded by the entire village, Collé is brought before the elders. Ciré is handed a whip by his elder brother and forced to beat his wife. With each lash that he inflicts upon her body, he implores her to say the words that will put an end to
the divided camps. On one side of the camp sit the elders and the Salindana who encourage Ciré to beat her into submission: “Tame her! Tame her harder! Break her.” On the other side, the camera uses a close-up on Collé’s daughter Amsatou, in tears, surrounded by her co-wives and the other women, who shout in support of Collé’s position: “Do not say it! Do not utter it Collé. Say NOTHING. Do not fall.” Watching Collé cry, however, brings tears to Ciré’s eyes. The more she cries, the more he cries. Public shame, designated uniquely for Collé, becomes a shared experience between husband and wife. The roles of agent and victim become blurred. Collé defies the village edicts, and Ciré’s tears betray his own conflicted position. By beating Collé, he appears to be an active participant in agreement with the patriarchal order, but through his eyes Ciré reveals solidarity with his wife and how much he too is a victim within this structure.

The beating and tears continue, equal in their intensity, until Mercenaire, the itinerant market merchant, hears the screams from the different camps in the distance. Residing at the periphery of the village, Mercenaire has set up a local haberdashery-cum-boutique in which he sells a hodgepodge of items to the villagers. Reputed for his appreciation of the local women, he spends a fair amount of time endearing himself to them both as potential clients and lovers. While he otherwise remains at the margins of local village practices, Mercenaire’s personal history indicates that he is not indifferent to injustice. A former military man, his career had come to a halt because of his zeal to pursue equitable remuneration among his compatriots. Having known the loss of his military career and imprisonment because of his personal convictions, Mercenaire is ready and willing to singularly take action in defense of Collé. He therefore makes his way to the center of the village dissension, takes the whip from Ciré’s hand, and puts an end to both Collé’s physical affliction and the public humiliation of husband and wife. Thanks to Mercenaire’s courageous gesture, Collé’s silence continues to protect three of the young girls who are thus spared “purification” by the Salindana. As if to underscore the film’s position with regard to female excision, the strength of Collé’s silence is contrasted with the wailing of the mother, who in support of the Salindana, had delivered over her daughter Diatou to these female excisors at whose hands she dies.

Here, Sembene exposes the complexity that a binary reading of power relations would fail to see. The maternal arms of the woman, embodied in both Diatou’s mother as much as the Salindana, are contrasted with those of Mercenaire, a man who in fact protects the female body. It is Mercenaire who rebels against the patriarchal injustice visited upon Collé, whereas the Salindana acts in complicity with the patriarchal dictates. Mercenaire’s role is truly revolutionary in that it supports Collé’s conviction as she earns the support of many more women who join with her to speak out against the cruelty of female excision. His actions further create a defense for Ciré, who is finally relieved from the public humiliation of beating his wife against his will.

The manner in which the elders choose to handle Mercenaire’s intervention reveals the degree to which hegemonic models of masculinity can obliterate alternative models. Where Ciré’s personal understanding of his manhood is suffocated within a larger phallocentric order, Mercenaire acts on his convictions as an outsider who is not wedded to the dictates of the local village authorities. Not reliant on the approval of the elders, he is free to act independently. His choice to express
a distinct relationship between men and women, notably more sympathetic to women as equals, threatens the patriarchal tenets in place. By defending a woman publicly, he diminishes the authority of the elders, challenges traditional practices and values, and betrays the male solidarity that sustains the elders’ authority. For this infraction Mercenaire pays with his life.

Just as the elders seek to govern the female body, they equally police male bodies. The mise en scène that frames the way in which Mercenaire is escorted out of the village accentuates the gravity of his conduct. In menacing white masks that foreshadow death (and call to mind the actions of the Ku Klux Klan in the American context), these men bearing torches ceremoniously shuttle the merchant out of the center of town to a place where he is murdered off screen. The recurring images of the young girls costumed to be “purified,” their genitals carved and stitched so that they can belong to society, are juxtaposed with a different brand of cruelty in which, to continue to exist as it is, this society must dispose of male figures who challenge the patriarchal order.

Susan Jeffords examines the tensions and conflicts between patriarchy and masculinity. Her words are apt with regard to Mercenaire:

> The structural expression of patriarchal interests takes place, distinct from masculinity in that it marks specific males as expendable in order to maintain the larger frame of masculine narration. (qtd. in Wiegman 368; emphasis added)

While Jeffords’s argument refers to the American historical context, it is useful here where we examine a traditional African practice bound to the observance of a religious ritual administered through patriarchal ideology. The example of Mercenaire’s trajectory reinforces the argument that through women’s issues, Sembene explores entrenched abuses in the power structure that also impact men. Collé’s flogging, Akudinobi remarks: “becomes a means through which Sembene powerfully blends the issue of female circumcision with social justice, as part of a much broader commentary, especially given Mercenaire’s subsequent murder” (Akudinobi 190). Women and men are victims under patriarchy, and it is clear from Sembene’s visual depiction that injustice is a shared experience.

The son of the village chieftain, Ibrahima is the third male character in *Moolaade* who challenges conventional male-female dynamics. Heir apparent to his father’s throne, Ibrahima has recently returned home from Paris to assume his social position and take a wife. Upon his return, Ibrahima is received with great pomp and ceremony. He is the image of wealth, success, and power, qualities that make him the most desirable young man in the village. In line with tradition, his father and uncle have chosen a suitable “purified” young girl (his cousin Fily who is eleven years old) to be his wife. Collé’s daughter, Amsatou, might have been a contender for this role, but the fact that she is a bilakoro (uncircumcised woman) makes their union impossible.

Ibrahima appears to have returned peaceably to the local practices: he pays respect to his community of women and men alike, offers money in recognition of financial hardship, and concedes to his father’s authority. In deference to his father, he observes more than he speaks. He listens to his father’s reservations with respect to the radio and television and their potential to interfere with the status quo. The radio, in particular, is regarded as a propaganda machine that introduces
new ideas into the village and is held accountable for Collé’s decision to challenge female circumcision. As a result, radios are being banned and burnt.

While the traditional Marxist position would argue against these media and in particular the television as representative of capitalist ideology, Sembene recognizes these media as avenues through which to connect with other social and cultural groups in a forum for the exchange of ideas: “My view is that, without media, there’s no future. It’s not the media itself that are of importance—it’s the content” (Rapfogel 24). Integrating new technologies and therefore new ideas into contemporary life in African villages and cities can only make audible and visible new avenues of choice. Sembene had witnessed the heated debates and discussions that resulted from the diffusion of Faat Kiné, originally made for television, which was shown in many social venues in and around Dakar. Validated by visual representations of their common experiences (through Faat-Kiné’s example), women gathered to interrogate their positions and recognize their strengths and choices in contemporary Senegal. The filmmaker is therefore aware of how the radio can also shape and diffuse images and ideas in progressive ways for his society and thus instantiates a mise en abyme in Moolaade’s narrative.

Ibrahima, who has had the benefit of these media beyond the confines of the village, becomes Sembene’s porte-parole and opposes the traditional tenets of the Elders: “Today, everywhere in the world, radios and televisions are parts of life. We cannot cut ourselves off from the progress of the world.” Ibrahima articulates the very shift that is taking place both within him and within the community, which the elders refuse to endorse. Ibrahima’s opposition to the elders’ point of view also gives the spectator a glimpse of the quiet tenacity of the villager’s son who respects his father’s wishes but begins to interrogate the security and authority that traditional customs bestow upon the elders.

During his visit to Collé’s compound to pay respects to her and the co-wives, Ibrahima reveals his liminal position with respect to the local village customs. Where Amsatou was deemed “impure” and thus could not serve Ibrahima the customary welcoming water during the ceremony of his return to the village, within Collé’s quarters, protocol is reconfigured and she ably makes the welcoming gesture (offering the beverage) she had originally hoped to perform. Ibrahima claims “honor and respect” for his father, but here the father’s law does not appear to rigorously dictate his conduct. His ambivalent social position begins to reveal itself.

It is nevertheless Ibrahima’s exchanges with Mercenaire, in particular, that forthrightly expose the contradictions in his conduct. Mercenaire perceives Ibrahima as a modern, elegant man who has, like himself, lived abroad and adopted new ideas and ways of living. (For some spectators, Ibrahima may even conjure up recollections of the profile of Sergeant Diatta.) As the village leader’s son, Ibrahima is responsible for satisfying expenses incurred by his father during his absence abroad. On his first visit to Mercenaire to pay his father’s debts, the merchant refers to him as Francenabe, an allusion to Ibrahima’s travels to France as much as to his elegant European attire and demeanor. Invoking Aime Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, Mercenaire reads Ibrahima’s physical presentation and financial success (“ses billets neufs” ‘his new bills’) as indicators of a man whose ideologies have been enriched by his travel experiences. However, during Ibrahima’s subsequent visit to Mercenaire, this time appearing in local dress, to pay for
the wedding expenses incurred by Amsatou (who had anticipated their nuptials), he announces to Mercenaire that this payment does not reflect an agreement to marry the uncircumcised girl. Rather, following his father and his uncle’s choice for him and in accordance with Muslim law and the benediction of the elders, he plans to marry his eleven-year-old cousin. Shocked by Ibrahima’s decision to defer to patriarchal order, Mercenaire accuses him, along with his father and uncle, of “pedophilia.” Using the term “pedophilia” specifically to denounce traditional custom, Mercenaire makes clear that Ibrahima knows, or at least should know, that this practice is unacceptable in other cultural contexts. During this confrontation, the spectator, through Mercenaire, realizes that European attire and new technologies mark but the beginning of a transformation. Ibrahima will, only much later, be compelled to fully assume his expanded knowledge and experiences once he witnesses the ways in which adherence to the father’s law in effect victimizes the women in his village.

Hearing the elders’ first public address on the matter of female circumcision, Ibrahima finally begins to gain clarity not so much on what has not changed in his village but rather on how much he has changed with respect to local custom. His return to the village thus becomes a means by which to measure his transformation in light of the village practices and the role he is charged to play. During the second village meeting on the matter, Ibrahima observes Collé’s confrontation with the elders and the vociferous support she has garnered from the village women. Collé’s steadfast opposition to female circumcision then lends Ibrahima courage. Recognizing how female circumcision subjugates the young girls and women to patriarchal law and that he is complicit in this practice through the marital arrangement with his cousin, he finally lays claim to his own expression of masculinity: “Father, my marriage is my own business.”

By dismissing his father’s position, Ibrahima undermines his father’s authority as village leader and threatens the traditional practices to which the elders adhere. If the village chief’s son does not uphold the village criteria that determine the appropriate woman for him, then he is making a mockery of the edicts that insist on female circumcision. In addition to destabilizing the perception of male solidarity as Mercenaire has done, Ibrahima turns away from a privileged position in which his male authority is assured toward a proactive expression of how he will conduct himself as a man. His indifference to the elders’ criteria, moreover, validates Collé’s decision to save her daughter, Amsatou, from circumcision and to protect other young girls. In this respect, Ibrahima steps forthrightly into the shared public space concerning the woman’s issue of purification and shows how men are directly implicated in this practice. He separates from the cohort of elders, which include his father, and moves toward Amsatou, thus making clear the conviction of his deep-rooted ideals as a man. In concert with Ciré’s claim that “it takes more than a pair of balls to make a man,” he walks away from “the era of the little tyrants.” He, no more than Collé, cannot be beaten into an allegedly biologically determined notion of identity. In response to Amsatou’s declaration that “je suis et resterai toujours un bilakoro” ‘I am and will remain “impure,”’ Ibrahima smiles approvingly, a gesture that suggests that her conduct makes her precisely the kind of young woman who can become his wife in the future. Much like Collé, Ibrahima understands the significance of individual choice and its ability to powerfully change his society.
Ciré, Ibrahima, Mercenaire, and their respective trajectories represent distinct social and material choices within a hegemonic masculine social order. To varying degrees, each of their actions exposes the male perspective on the complex power structure and violence that underwrite patriarchal order. While the female body marks the original site of contestation, it is the exposure of this body’s pain and violence that subsequently emboldens these male characters to speak up. In defense of his action to stop Collé’s beating, Mercenaire screams: “I can’t stand the violence.” Collé’s beating becomes the occasion to unmask the pain and suffering that men, as much as women, endure in the name of the deceptive form of male solidarity called patriarchy. Indeed, the process of change is gradual, but Sembene’s everyday heroism opens up a participatory space in which both men and women can choose to come together to effect change. The fact that Mercenaire takes away the whip makes it possible for Collé to subsequently disarm the Salindana, who have been mutilating female bodies in the name of tradition. Collé’s husband is liberated from the grip of the elders at the moment that Collé points out that the Great Imam affirms that female excision is not a religious edict: “Purification is not required by Islam. The Grand Imam said it on the radio. Each year millions of women go for pilgrimage to Mecca. All have not been cut.” Once he sees the duplicity of the elders, Ciré formally takes his distance from them and steps into a new experience of his manhood, one that recognizes and honors his female partner(s). Heroism is not merely about being a woman but about being a particular woman who, by defying patriarchy, mobilizes both women and men to effect change. Finally, by walking away from his father’s law, notably in the traditional attire that symbolizes his social status and sustained commitment to the local community, Ibrahima points to a generational shift that opens up new possibilities in which to envision this community. He joins Ciré by suggesting a melding of values that calls into question the binary tensions between tradition and modernity and further distinguishes himself by opting to choose a female partner on his terms.

THE AFRICAN HERO VERSUS AFRICA’S EVERYDAY HEROES

Let us now return to the evocation of the making of *Samory Touré* and the promise that this film holds to finally produce the one film that Sembene wanted so much to make to complete his career. As a Pan-African production, the scope of this production will undoubtedly enrich African historiography by inducting one more unsung African hero into the pantheon of great men. On a practical level, the making of this film will also provide employment opportunities within an industry that has waned more than waxed during President Wade’s administration.

As the leader of Senegal since 2000, the president has become increasingly preoccupied with his own legacy to the Senegalese nation. He is known for financing prestigious construction projects that will attest to his monumental reign. The choice to support the making of *Samory Touré* must therefore be understood as embedded within the political agenda of his administration. This film will certainly offer a new face to the economic objectives of his governance, but it will also reinforce the place of patriarchy within the president’s administration. Insofar as he continues to look back into a historical past that is specifically accusatory of colonialism and the ways in which it has paralyzed Africa and, in particular,
African manhood, he will never need to confront the everyday victims of the patriarchy in which his authority is entrenched. In other words, if Wade is able to erect a grand enough African hero, he can block the light that Sembene’s camera has shed on the victims of patriarchy—men and women—who are actually interrogating the premises upon which traditional manhood has been established and who are more importantly *every day* striving to create new paradigms through which to live their subjectivities.

No one would be better positioned than Sembene himself to identify what the president is doing, and to tell him as he has done in the past: “Je t’ai pris en flagrant délit” ‘I caught you in the act.’ For a long time, colonialism operated as a spectral figure in the filmmaker’s work. The way in which the black man’s self-assertion is entangled in this historical system of subjugation is an epistemological fact, which has created a representational problem of African manhood within the cineaste’s filmography. African heroes have adorned the walls of his films, but narratives of African men have consistently proven inadequate, incapable, European mimics of what African masculinity might resemble.

At the time that *Guelwaar* was realized in 1992, the filmmaker claimed: “If I were a woman, I would never marry an African. Women should marry real men, not mentally deficient ones” (Chréacháin 244). Sembene’s struggle with the image of the African man in his filmography incited critics David Murphy and Patrick Williams, in 2007, to return to a previous claim that the prominent position women occupy even in his later films appears “to compensate for the failures of men” (Murphy 61). This observation is set apart typographically within parentheses in a way that hints at the haunting criticism of Sembene’s complex gender politics. After all, this new phase in Sembene’s filmography marked but the beginning of his attempt to work through the complex dynamics between men and women in contemporary Africa. For it bears noting that the representation of patriarchy that contests the many expressions of masculinity and femininity remains itself entrenched in a heteropatriarchal framework where gender dynamics are specifically male-female, and heroines by convention mothers.

Sembene’s female characters and their concerns in *Faat Kiné* and *Moolaade* enhance the possibility for male characters to lay claims to novel paradigms of masculinities no longer shackled to the colonial narrative of the past, but rather anchored in the practice of their material experience of the everyday. Sembene understood that colonialism had become, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a shibboleth in particularly disabling ways for expressions of black masculinity. As the Father of African Cinema, he knew that for a certain time it had been critical to create master narratives of African history for African spectators in his “evening school” who did not recognize themselves in the history they were being taught. But once his lens shifted in accordance with the mutations that were actually taking place in his country as well as in other African regions like Burkina Faso, he recognized that the straitjacket discourses on colonialism risked constricting the vision of the everyday Senegalese man and woman who are forging a new history for his country.

Left to apprehend Sembene’s legacy in 2008, and to understand why he insisted on *everyday heroism* in his final films, I am reminded of a particular scene in *Faat Kiné* in which the heroine mistakes one male character for another. Pathé is a handicapped man whose mobility has been impaired. Kiné along with those in
the work community purchases a wheelchair for him that he later sells to buy food and take care of his girlfriend. After not seeing Pathé for weeks, Kiné glimpses the profile of a handicapped man in a wheelchair and runs after him. The man turns to Kiné and she realizes that she is mistaken. Rather than someone who fails to use the help of others, this handicapped man is a mobile messenger using his wheelchair to make a living. In this sense, he highlights the shift in Sembene’s vision of men. He does not need Kiné’s guidance to determine his social conduct. He, along with Kiné, is a messenger of change. Kiné’s initial misstep resembles certain critics’ misreading of masculinity in Sembene’s final films.

As a social realist filmmaker, it was important to the integrity of his work that Sembene document what he was seeing and demonstrate how this vision could shape future expressions of choice for Senegalese women and men, in particular, and African men and women, in general, according to his continental vision for Africa. In Faat Kiné and Moolaade, Sembene insisted on individual choices, proactive choices anchored in the familiar, the banal, that could lead to exceptional moments of change in the everyday. Reflecting on what cinema meant to him, in one of his final interviews, the cineaste inflects Guelwaar’s words to assert: “Cinema allows me to show my people their predicament so that they can take responsibility. They hold their destiny in their hands.”

NOTES

1. Following the promotion of Ceddo in 1984, Sembene spoke of his intent to invest all of the earnings into the making of Samory (Le Soleil, July 1984: 2). In Souka magazine during the same year, the filmmaker declared: “[M]on ambition c’est de faire Samory et de m’arrêter” ‘My ambition is to make Samory and then stop’ (6).
2. The conversion to US dollars is based on the conversion rate posted on 9 June 2008, the day the president’s endowment was announced.
3. All translations from French to English are mine except where I have been able to directly quote English translations from source material.
4. See Lemon’s fine study on the topic in “Masculinity in Crisis (?)”
5. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Sembene cast the same actor, Ibrahim Sane, to interpret the roles of both Sergeant-Major Diatta (Camp de Thiaroye, 1988) and Jean Guèye (Faat Kiné, 2000).
6. In his public address on the occasion of the national homage, President Wade referred to a past encounter with the filmmaker where as president he had been given preferential treatment by the airport authorities. The president described how Sembene glared at him and declared: “Je t’ai pris en flagrant délit” ‘I caught you in the act.’
7. See disc two of Moolaade for the “Making of Moolaade” by Samba Gadjigo, in which the filmmaker makes clear the role of cinema.

WORKS CITED


