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SUMARIO / SUMMARY

OBITUARIO / OBITUARY

JUAN MANUEL SANTANA PÉREZ. Alberto Anaya Hernández (1946-2025). Cautivo de la Historia / *Luis Alberto Anaya Hernández (1945-2025). Captive of History* 9-11

DOSSIER: Estudios Africanos, Enfoques multidisciplinares desde las Humanidades y las Ciencias Sociales / *African Studies, Multidisciplinary Approaches from the Humanities and Social Sciences*

DANIEL CASTILLO HIDALGO: Introducción al dossier *Estudios Africanos. Enfoques multidisciplinares desde las humanidades y las ciencias sociales* 15-18

ELSA AIMÉ GONZALEZ*, ALFREDO DOS SANTOS SOARES: La diáspora africana como reflejo y sujeto transformador de las relaciones internacionales, a partir del concepto de sankofa / *The African diaspora as a reflection and transformative subject of international relations, based on the concept of sankofa* 19-43

ATTA BREDOUMOU ALBERT AMOAKON: La Diáspora ecuatoguineana en la Comunidad de Madrid: Análisis de los movimientos migratorios y la situación actual / *The Equatorial Guinean Diaspora in the Community of Madrid: Analysis of migratory movements and the current situation* 45-67

SAIBA BAYO: Art, Memory, and Recollection in Ousmane Sembene's Historiographic Film Emitaï (1971) / *Arte, memoria y recuerdo en la película historiográfica Emitaï (1971) de Ousmane Sembene* 69-95

ÁNGELES JURADO QUINTANA: Estrategias de disidencia de las mujeres en contextos africanos: el caso de la desnudez pública en Costa de Marfil / *Women's strategies of dissidence in African contexts: the case of public nudity in Côte d'Ivoire* 97-126

DAGAUH GWENNAEL GAUTIER KOMENAN: Realineamiento Geopolítico en el Sahel occidental: Causas y características (2002-2025) / *Geopolitical realignment in the western Sahel: Causes and characteristics (2002–2025)* 127-152

JOSÉ MANUEL MAROTO BLANCO*, DJANDUÉ BI DROMBÉ: Sankofa: de la deconstrucción colonial a la reconstrucción sociocultural a través de las lenguas en Costa de Marfil / *Sankofa: from colonial deconstruction to sociocultural reconstruction through languages in Ivory Coast* 153-180

ORIOL PUIG CEPERO: A climate of migration in the Sahel: between mobility and immobility / *Un clima de migración en el Sahel: entre la movilidad y la inmovilidad* 181-202

Vegueta
ANUARIO DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

Vol. 26 Núm. 1 • 2026 • D.L.: GC1206-1214
ISSN: 1133-598X • eISSN: 2341-1112
https://doi.org/10.51349/veg
Periodicidad: Semestral

ESTUDIOS / *STUDIES*

JOSE ANTONIO BARRA MARTÍNEZ*, FRANCISCO JOSÉ MORALES YAGO, MARÍA LUISA DE LÁZARO TORRES: Consecuencias para el desarrollo local y territorial de las epidemias de Ébola en África / *Consequences for Local and Territorial Development of the Ebola Epidemics in Africa* 205-230

ADRIÁN CALONGE MIRANDA: Ejemplos de coroplastia de culto doméstico procedentes del complejo alfarero de Tritium Magallum (Tricio, La Rioja) / *Examples of domestic cult coroplasty from the Tritium Magallum pottery complex (Tricio, La Rioja)* 231-253

ROQUE HIDALGO ÁLVAREZ*, CARMEN MORENTE MUÑOZ, JULIO PÉREZ SERRANO: Identificación de las clases propietarias de Granada mediante su cédula personal en 1926 / *Identification of the owning class through their personal ID card: case study of Granada in 1926* 255-285

BELÉN GARCÍA MALAGÓN: Los planes de gestión como instrumentos de conservación patrimonial: el caso de la ciudad de Ávila y su implantación / *Management plans as heritage conservation instruments. The Case of the City of Ávila and Its Implementation* 287-315

ENRICO GIORDANO: El establecimiento del Movimiento Federalista Europeo en España. Un caso de estudio sobre oposición antifranquista y representatividad política y territorial en Europa (1971-1976) / *The establishment of the European Federalist Movement in Spain. A case study of anti-Franco opposition and political and territorial representation in Europe (1971-1976)* 317-338

CAROLINA HENRIQUES PEREIRA: Espacios de «acogida» de refugiados durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial: los campos de internamiento franceses y españoles y las «residencias fijas» portuguesas / *Refugee «reception» spaces during the Second World War: French and Spanish internment camps and Portuguese «fixed residences»* 339-357

ELISABETH MENOR NATAL: Las inscripciones funerarias del yacimiento de la Mezquita «La Mezquita» (Cadalso de los Vidrios, Madrid) / *The funerary inscriptions of the «La Mezquita» Archaeological Site (Cadalso de los Vidrios, Madrid)* 359-388

MARIANO MONGE SUÁREZ: Teratopolítica, monstruos y portentos: una perspectiva biohistórica, 1767-1820 / *Teratopolitics, monsters and portents: a biohistorical perspective, 1767-1820* 389-414

JOSÉ LUIS MORENO-PEREZ: Estrategias diplomáticas y sombras de inteligencia: las relaciones internacionales de las organizaciones estudiantiles españolas durante la Guerra Fría Cultural (1945-1969) / *Diplomatic strategies and intelligence shadows: international relations of Spanish student organizations during the Cultural Cold War (1945-1969)* 415-443

FRANCISCO MANUEL PASTOR GARRIGUES: No habrá guerra del Rif. El bloqueo de las guarniciones españolas de Alhucemas y Vélez de la Gomera (1899-1900) / *There will be no Rif war. The blockade of the Spanish garrisons of Alhucemas and Vélez de la Gomera (1899-1900)* 445-472

Vegueta
ANUARIO DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

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ISSN: 1133-598X • eISSN: 2341-1112
https://doi.org/10.51349/veg
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DANIEL PÉREZ ESTÉVEZ: Cooperación entre museos desde un enfoque decolonial. La Sociedad Científica El Museo Canario y el Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle / Musée de l´Homme de París / *Cooperation between museums from a decolonial perspective. The Scientific Society El Museo Canario and the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle / Musée de l´Homme of Paris* 473-504

JOSÉ LUIS PUYA LUCENA: «Si no es también tratando mal de palabra y obra». Rosa del Bechio Verme ante la Real Justicia y los negocios familiares / *«But it is also by treatring badly of word and deed». Rosa del Bechio Verme before the Royal Justice and family businesses* 505-518

JORGE RAMÓN ROS: El Pueblo y la amenaza del bloqueo urbano: los levantamientos valencianos contra el impuesto de consumos en 1887 / *The people and the threat of urban blockade: the Valencian uprisings against consumption tax in 1887* 519-543

ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ GONZÁLEZ: Imaginando el desaparecido Archivo del marquesado de Ayamonte 500 años después / *Imagining the now lost Archives of the Marquisate of Ayamonte 500 years afterwards* 545-583

RESEÑAS / *REVIEWS*

FERNANDO BRUQUETAS DE CASTRO: Gerardo Muñoz Lorente, *Historia del Sahara Español. De la colonización al abandono (1884-1976).* Editorial Almuzara, Córdoba, 2024; 717 págs. ISBN 978-84-10520-39-4 587-590

DANIEL CASTILLO HIDALGO: Jesús Mirás Araujo, Nuria. Rodríguez-Martín (eds.), *Economic History of the European Energy Industry, Routledge Explorations in Economic History*, Routledge, London, 2025, 216 págs. ISBN: 978-1-032-55034-3 591-595

MARÍA CARRIÓN LONGARELA: Miguel Taín Guzmán y Patricia Fra López (eds.), *Georgiana Goddard King y The Way of Saint James (1920)*, Akal, Madrid, 2024, 444 págs. ISBN: 978-84-460-5549-5 597-603

CATHERINE MUÑOZ: Mirella Romero Recio, (ed.), *Pompeii in the Visual and Performing Arts: Its Reception in Spain and Latin America. (IMAGINES-Classical Receptions in the Visual and Performing Arts)*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2023, 256 págs. ISBN 9781350277885 605-608

NAYRA PÉREZ HERNÁNDEZ: Antonio Becerra Bolaños, *Más allá del vuelva usted mañana. La administración pública en la literatura española, S. XVI-S. XIX (Florilegio)*. ULPGC Ediciones. Colección Manuel Velázquez Cabrera, n.º 3, Las Palmas de G.C., 2023, 154 págs. ISBN 978-84-9042-513-8. Antonio Becerra Bolaños, *¡Qué administración tendría yo si me dejaran! La administración pública en la literatura española (1839-1939) (Florilegio)*. ULPGC Ediciones. Colección Manuel Velázquez Cabrera, no 4, Las Palmas de G.C., 344 págs. ISBN 978-84-9042-555-8 609-611

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Leonor Zozaya-Montes: Rocío Postigo Ruiz, *Notariado público en Sevilla en la primera mitad del siglo XV*. Ediciones Trea (col. Piedras angulares), Gijón, 2023, 236 págs. ISBN: 978-84-19823-16-8 613-617

Estadísticas 2025 / *Statistics 2025* 619-620

Dossier

Estudios Africanos, Enfoques multidisciplinares desde las Humanidades y las Ciencias Sociales

African Studies, Multidisciplinary Approaches from the Humanities and Social Sciences

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Art, Memory, and Recollection in Ousmane Sembene's Historiographic Film *Emitaï* (1971)

Arte, memoria y recuerdo en la película historiográfica Emitaï *(1971) de Ousmane Sembene*

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of colonial memory and recollection in Ousmane Sembene's historiographic film *Emitaï* (1971). Drawing on a close reading of the film and underexplored archival materials, this article examines how Sembène reconfigures art, oral traditions, and ritual practices as narrative strategies for critiquing colonial memory in the postcolonial period. It argues that *Emitaï* stages a critical encounter between memory (*mémoire*), recollection (*rappel*) (Ricoeur), and historiographic cinema (Burgoyne), foregrounding how collective memory is mediated through narrative, imagination, and performance. Grounded in postcolonial film analysis, this study revisits *Emitaï* with four key objectives. First, it theorises the function of African art and collective memory within Sembène's historiographic project. Second, it assesses Sembene's ideological and artistic approach to recollection and his aesthetic portrayal of Joola colonial memory. Third, it examines his critique of the colonial simulacrum and propaganda. Finally, it analyses his Marxist framing of faith, power, and solidarity in times of collective struggle.

Keywords: Emitaï, colonial memory, recollection, African art, historical African cinema.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la intersección entre la memoria colonial y el recuerdo en la influyente película historiográfica Emitaï (1971) de Ousmane Sembene. A través de una lectura detallada de la película y de materiales de archivo poco explorados, el artículo analiza cómo Sembene reconfigura el arte, las tradiciones orales, y las prácticas rituales como herramientas narrativas para criticar la memoria colonial en el período poscolonial. Se sostiene que *Emitaï* escenifica un encuentro crítico entre la memoria (mémoire), el recuerdo (rappel) (Ricoeur) y el cine historiográfico (Burgoyne), poniendo de relieve cómo la memoria colectiva se transmite a través de la narrativa, la imaginación y la representación. Basándose en el análisis cinematográfico poscolonial, el artículo revisita *Emitaï* con cuatro objetivos

clave. En primer lugar, teoriza sobre la función del arte africano y la memoria colectiva dentro del Proyecto historiográfico de Sembene. En segundo lugar, evalúa el enfoque ideológico y artístico de Sembene sobre el recuerdo y su representación estética de la memoria colonial, los Joola. En tercer lugar, examina su crítica al simulacro colonial y a la propaganda. Por último, analiza la perspectiva marxista de Sembene sobre la fe, el poder y la solidaridad en tiempos de lucha colectiva.

Palabras clave: *Emitaï*, Memoria colonial, recolección, arte africano, cine histórico africano.

1. INTRODUCTION

> My primary aim with *Emitaï* was to turn the film into a school of history.
> (Sembene, 1972)

Emitaï (1971) is a landmark historical film by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene. It provides a rigorous portrayal of Joola resistance to the violence, coercion, and ideological apparatuses that structured French colonial rules. The narrative is anchored in a documented episode of colonial repression in 1942, a moment when the European empires and their «civilising rhetoric» were profoundly destabilised by World War II. Confronted with severe manpower shortages, French colonial authorities intensified the forced conscription of young men from the colonies, while simultaneously requisitioning food such as rice to sustain the troops. These colonial measures provoked resistance among Joola communities in southern Senegal. To re-establish order, colonial authorities employed armed violence, culminating in a brutal mass execution.

The film's title *Emitaï* (the god of thunder in Joola language) already signals its deep grounding in ancestral cosmogony and the collective memory of the Joola.[1] *Emitaï* also stands as a landmark of nationalist cinema, being his first work produced entirely with local resources.[2] Despite the limited funding available to African filmmakers at the time, Sembene succeeded in mobilising a budget of nearly 500 million old CFA francs (≈ 762,000 €).[3] He secured support from Senegalese institutions, including President Léopold Sédar Senghor, the «founding father» of the nation and the principal architect of the Négritude ideology.[4] This backing

1 Ritual practices in traditional Joola societies are deeply rooted in obedience to supernatural powers called Ukin, which serve as intermediaries between human beings and God (ata-émit in the Joola language). The ritual transmission of collective memory is central to Joola culture, in which names, expressions, and cultural elements—such as songs, gestures, and ceremonies—carry layered forms of knowledge, interpreted differently across individuals, communities, and social groups. See Diedhiou (2011).

2 His previous films, *Borom Sarret* (1963), *Niaye* (1964), and *La Noire de...* (1966) benefited from French cooperation programmes, while *Mandabi* (1968) was financed by the French Ministry of Culture.

3 Film funding in Africa has historically been marked by persistent precarity, although, the period between 1967 and 1975 witnessed a notable increase in high-budget film productions, facilitated by improved access to resources. See: Vieyra, Le cinéma négro-africain, bilan des années 1980–1981, The Vieyra Collection, Black Film Center & Archive, Box 13, Folder 9.

4 See the correspondence between Senghor and Sembene in which the President confirmed the

reflects a broader cultural nationalism of the early postcolonial period, one that sought to reclaim and promote ancestral heritage (Petty, 1996; Stam, 2000).

With *Emitaï*, Sembene begins his foray into historiographic cinema (Burgoyne, 2003), a path he continues with *Ceddo* (1977) and *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988). He challenges not only colonial narratives but also the positions of many African official historians who aligned themselves with nationalist discourses (Diouf, 2000; Cham, 2008). In this sense, he offers a critical reflection on postcolonial nation-building and anticolonial struggles, contributing to his broader project of establishing an «African school» of history: «What I want to do first of all is to give them (African audiences) an exact idea of Africa, a better idea of Africa, so they can learn of other African ethnic groups».[5] While such pedagogical aspiration may appear to resonate with the elitist cultural nationalism typical of postcolonial intellectuals and artists in the early decades of independence (Haffner, 1977; Tcheuyap, 2011), Sembene's approach diverges significantly. Rather than glorifying the idealised African identity (Boulaga, 1976; Mudimbe, 1988), *Emitaï* portrays colonial memory at the same time it depicts the fractures and contradictions in postcolonial Africa (De Groof, 2010).

This article examines how Sembene challenges dominant narratives of the African past and highlights the roles of art and memory in early postcolonial African cinema. It argues that *Emitaï* functions as a cautionary tale about popular mnemonic experience, and further considers how Sembene employs his art, cinema, to challenge the myth of the continent's «glorious past» and to reinterpret Joola colonial memory, not as an immutable repository, but as a dynamic and contested space of representation and critical recollection. By questioning particular aspects of Joola colonial memory and ancestral legacy, Sembene destabilises the narratives surrounding the history of Africa to offer an alternative to nationalist rhetoric. In doing so, he opens space for new cinematic understandings of cultural meaning at a time when Négritude ideology dominated political discourse and intellectual debate (Weaver, 2004; De Groof, 2010).

This study is grounded in the broader postcolonial critique of African cinema (Murphy, 2000; Stam, 2000; Tcheuyap, 2011). This approach seeks to understand African films beyond the narratives of cultural nationalism, which often perceive cinema primarily as a medium to deconstruct the Eurocentric gaze on the continent (Boughédir, 1992; Haffner, 1977; 1978; Sanogo, 2015; Diawar, 1992). Cinema in Africa emerged during the European colonialism, and its development has been shaped by the conditions of newly independent nations. By the 1970s, Senegalese cinema had established itself as a leading force in Black Africa (Vieyra, 2012). This period was marked by the rise of a new generation of filmmakers, such as Djibril Diop Mambéty and Mahama Johnson Traoré, who engaged with critical social issues.[6]

support of his government and promised his own contribution. Ousmane Sembene Archives, Lilly Library, Box 1, Subseries *Emitaï*. Folder Correspondence and contracts, 1971-1973.

5 Weaver, 1972: 25.

6 Traoré's Diakhabi (1970) addressed patriarchal oppression and the condition of women in Senegalese society, while Mambéty's Badou Boy (1970) portrayed the precarious lives of youth in Dakar's urban peripheries.

The increasingly critical tone adopted by these young filmmakers alarmed the authorities, and their films frequently faced censorship for portraying what were perceived as «uncomfortable truths» (Vieyra, 1975: 187). In addition to these nationalist constraints, film distribution remained largely under the control of French companies (Diawara, 1992). Due to its unflinching depiction of colonial brutality, *Emitaï* faced significant restrictions in its distribution circuit.

Emitaï has received sustained scholarly attention. Vieyra (1972-2012), Sembene's production director, offers valuable insights into the film's anthropological and artistic depth. However, his analysis, based on an early script rather than the completed film, does not fully capture Sembene's critical intent. Vieyra also overlooks key political dynamics of post-independence Senegal, which may in part reflect his own ambivalent position as a *conseiller* to Senghor. Pfaff (1981; 1984) adopts an anthropological lens, which she complements with interviews with Sembene, yet her reading suffers from limited referencing and a reductive gender binary that posits an opposition between men and women. Murphy (2000) addresses these gaps through a nuanced postcolonial interpretation, approaching *Emitaï* as a nonconformist text shaped by ideological tensions between Sembène and Négritude scholars. Fofana (2012) builds on these existing approaches to conduct an innovative analysis that focuses on discourse, resistance, and gender. However, he pays less attention to Sembene's artistic project and the film's mnemonic dimensions. Cham (2008) and Diouf (2000) read *Emitaï* as an act of memory retrieval, emphasising how Sembene challenges the dominant historiography through his foregrounding of marginalised popular memory. Recent contributions to the study of Sembene's work provide broader insights into his oeuvre, including *Emitaï* (Dos Santos Alves, 2024; Ka, 2025), yet they fall short of offering a sustained critical engagement with Sembene's perspective on the contradictions within traditional Joola societies. More importantly, the themes of art, memory, and recollection remain largely overlooked in most of these studies.

By addressing these limitations, this study moves beyond the «oppositional criticism» (Tcheuyap, 2011:7), which merged nationalist narratives with film criticism and intertwined fiction with scholarship. It draws on ethnographic data and unpublished archival materials,[7] and offers a refreshed reading of *Emitaï*, emphasising the director's engagement with both colonial memory and recollection, and replacing the film within the broader postcolonial discourse on how the fragmented history of colonised nations should be rewritten by joining its disparate pieces to remember and visualise the collective drive for freedom. The article begins with a theoretical review that links African art to the notions of memory and cinematic historiography. This is followed by an examination of recollection and Joola colonial memory. The third section explores the portrayal of colonial violence, simulacra, and propaganda, while the final section addresses faith, colonial oppression, and collective resistance.

7 My access to the screenplay of *Emitaï* in Sembene's manuscript archive facilitated my understanding of the film's dialogues. In addition, I cross-checked my understanding with insights from a contact in Diembering, (Oumar Diatta) whose relatives participated in *Emitaï* as non-professional actors (see Image 1)

2. AFRICAN ART, MEMORY AND CINEMATIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Africa's colonial history is closely tied to the «aestheticisation» of its cultural artefacts and expressions, which were frequently manipulated, decontextualised, and marginalised. This «invention of Africa» (Mudimbe, 1988) involved the systematic extraction of African cultural artefacts from their original spiritual, ritual, and social contexts, followed by their reclassification as objects of Western aesthetic contemplation, reification and domination. What was labelled «savage or primitive art» encompassed a wide range of objects « introduced by the contact between African and European» (Mudimbe, 1988: 10). From the nineteenth century onwards, the *primitivisation* of African art not only distorted the original meanings of these artefacts but also laid the groundwork for the enduring marginalisation of African systems of knowledge by European anthropologists and ethnologists (Mudimbe, 1988: 23). Western Scholars, influenced by the Hegelian philosophy of history, thus invented and reproduced interpretative frameworks that imposed external meanings on African art while also facilitating its systematic decontextualisation and commodification. As Bidima aptly states, African art became *l'art des Africains, revu, corrigé, vendu et édité par les Blancs*— «the art of Africans, revised, corrected, sold, and published by Whites» (Diagne, 2007: 48).

The publication of *Bantu Philosophy* in 1945 by Belgian missionary Placide Tempels represented the cutting edge of the aestheticisation of Africa. From Tempels' work, African art and artists were conceptualised through the lens of a «philosophy», in which African artworks and technologies were understood as animated by vital energies that mediate between the metaphysical realm materiality of life (Tempels, 2006: 31, 42-43). Tempels'ethnological approach to African art and systems of knowledge significantly influenced mid-twentieth-century African thought, especially Négritude scholars in their efforts to articulate an «authentic» African aesthetic grounded in indigenous knowledge and traditions (Wiredu, 2004). African art was conceived not only as a mode of aesthetic expression but as a repository of Black civilisation, encapsulating foundational myths, collective memory, and historical consciousness (Senghor, 1956; 1963). Under Senghor's leadership, traditional forms of expression such as oral poetry, sculpture, and music were celebrated as means of preserving and reinterpreting precolonial African history and spirituality (Senghor, 1967).

Senghor's view shaped a broader project of early postcolonial nationalist historiography, which sought to restore the ancestral identity of African peoples (Bâ, 1974-76). Situating this debate within the narrative of *Emitaï* is particularly relevant, as the representation of Joola artistic creation challenges colonial narratives and engages with the continent's history critically. By using African art to counter Western-oriented historiography and to tell a story rooted in African collective memory and perspective, Sembene aligns himself with the broader postcolonial movement to reclaim African culture and heritage, while also challenging the ideological appeal of Négritude.

The *Négritudinist* approach to African identity, thought and history, described as «ethnophilosophy» (Hountondji, 1977), received harsh criticism for

reinforcing Eurocentric representations of Africa. Négritude has been criticised for interpreting African ways of being, systems of knowledge, and historical evolution within the ethnological framework of colonialism (Boulaga, 1968; 1976; Mudimbe, 1988). Although acknowledging this critical perspective on Négritude, scholars such as Diagne (2013) warn that an outright rejection of this ethnophilosophy risks obscuring the relevance of oral traditions and collective memory in African societies. Diagne's position is particularly compelling, for the role of art in preserving and renewing popular memory can be seen in Igbo aesthetic practices, notably through the institution of *Mbari*, a communal form of artistic expression rooted in ritual as a mechanism of social transformation (Achebe, 1988). According to Achebe, artworks created within Mbari—including sculptures, murals, and architectural forms—serve as mediums of memory, recalling historical and contemporary events as well as collective experiences. They allow the community to document the past, integrate new events, and preserve shared recollections, thereby creating a continuous dialogue between memory, past, and present (Anyokwu, 2008). This approach to art lies not in its permanent, museistic, existence but in its capacity to record, interpret, and renew cultural heritage across generations. As Achebe observes, «art must interpret all human experience» (1988: 62), reflecting a dynamic of artistic creation in which each generation re-engages with the past from a specific context, employing new methods and techniques. In this framework, art operates as a fluid medium of historical transmission rather than as a static preservation of the past.

This emphasis on art as a generative, kinesic process resonates with Sembene's critical engagement with African traditions. In his essay *Man is Culture* (1975),[8] Sembene challenges inherited notions of sacred African art. While acknowledging the spiritual dimension of African art, Sembene affirms that « all art is sacred in its origin» (*Man is Culture*, 10). Contesting Amadou Hampâté Bâ's position in a seminal text presented just a year earlier at the UNESCO symposium on African art, Sembene calls for the dismantling of the «myth» surrounding African art. He contends that although art contributes to the recreation of collective memory, the repetition of this memory without a critical approach is a sign of « intellectual deficiency» (*Man is Culture*, 11-13). For Sembene, Africans must reimagine art as a means of emerging from oppressive conditions rather than engaging in a nostalgic reconstruction of the past. His critical approach resonates with Frantz Fanon's revolutionary theory in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). For Fanon, «it is not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged; rather we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called in question» (Fanon, 1963: 227). This Fanonian approach to the past informs Sembene's broader conception of historiographic cinema.

8 This undated text by Sembene is preserved in the Sembene Archives, with the English version stored in Box 16 and the French version in Box 25. It transcribes lectures delivered by Sembene during his addresses at American universities: on 5 March 1975 at Indiana University (Murphy, 2000: 29) and on 21 March 1975 at Howard University, Washington, D.C. (Pfaff, 1984: 147).

Burgoyne's *Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film* provides a compelling framework for understanding historiographic cinema. He conceives historiographic film as an active constructor of memory rather than a passive recorder of history, challenging the notion that cinema merely « carries within it an archival record of the period in which it was made» (Burgoyne, 2003: 220). For this author, film is no longer simply a medium for recalling the past or recovering lost cultural essences; it becomes «an emblematic expression, not of the real, but of the hyperreal» (224). In this sense, *Emitaï* exemplifies how cinema can function as a space where recollection and imagination converge to represent historical experiences and evoke the presence of an absent or suppressed reality. In this regard, Sembene's approach to history through cinema resonates with Ricoeur's idea that memory often presents itself as «faithful to the past» (Ricoeur, 2004: 4). This apparent fidelity must be assessed, considering the historiographical task of establishing «factual truth» (2004: 5). Ricoeur distinguishes memory (*mémoire*) from recollection (*rappel*). The former refers to the immediate and affective experience of the past, whereas recollection is a mediated process through which the past is reactivated and reshaped via narrative and interpretation (2004: 205–307).

The intersection between memory and recollection in *Emitaï* functions as a means of honoring the past, producing a counter-narrative to colonial history and propaganda. This act of commemoration, however, does not prevent Sembene from interrogating the postcolonial manipulation of tradition by nationalist discourses on collective memory. Rather, Sembene tackles both the colonial memory of the Joola, extending to African nations, and the postcolonial potentates who seek to generate loyalty through violence and propaganda (Mbembe, 2001; Barry, 2009). Postcolonial propaganda functions as the mimetism of colonial propaganda. Peter B. Clarke (1986) examines how colonial authorities relied on cinematic propaganda that exploited traditional hierarchies and cultural norms, often deploying paternalistic narratives to justify imperialism. In a similar vein, other authors (Haggith and Smith, 2011; Bouchard, 2023) explore how cinema was used by colonial administrations to promote imperial unity and loyalty by presenting colonial soldiers as noble and devoted. As Bouchard brilliantly demonstrates, colonial propaganda frequently represented the troops in ways that reinforced evolving racial ideologies and colonial hierarchies. For instance, film screenings in rural West African villages often involved local interpreters or commentators who contextualised the films according to the values of the empire, aiming to encourage viewers to enlist and fight against the barbaric Nazis. According to Bouchard, colonial propaganda sought to frame participation in the war as a collective effort «against the enemies of the empire» (Bouchard, 2023: 31). Sembene himself had been influenced by this manipulation, as he later recalled: «Without knowing why, we were hired for the liberation of Europe».[9]

9 Gerald Peary and Patrick McGilligan, 1972, in Busch and Annas, 2008: 49.

3. ON RECOLLECTION AND THE JOOLA COLONIAL MEMORY

Image 1. Sembene and non-professional actors during the shooting of *Emitaï*. Sembene mss (1956-2008, Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington. Box 26, Subseries *Emitaï*.

Emitaï was filmed in the village of Diembering and Youtou, two Joola villages located 80 kilometres from Ziguinchor, the colonial capital of Casamance (today the capital of the Ziguinchor region). Contrary to Pfaff's assertion that Sembene chose the Joola people for their «social design» and to «oppose African myths and traditions to colonial domination» (Pfaff, 1981:2), it is more appropriate to interpret the film's ethnographic focus as part of a broader artistic and political project. Rather than foregrounding the particularity of the Joola—marked by their complex cosmogony and egalitarian social organisation—*Emitaï* reflects Sembene's wider ambition to rethink the function of art and collective memory in postcolonial Africa, particularly in relation to visual representation and historical consciousness. While invoking the past was a strategy to confront historical trauma and ensure cultural survival, Sembene had an unequivocal stance on the idea that «the values, symbols, and myths of the past cannot be used to solve contemporary problems» (*Man is Culture*, 5). This position underscores Sembene's secular materialist approach to tradition, which resists both colonial exoticism and nationalist idealisation in favor of critical transformation.

Image 2. Sembene, during the shooting of *Emitaï*. Sembene mss (1956-2008, Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington. Box 26 Subseries *Emitaï*.

To make *Emitaï,* Sembene spent two years in the region collecting oral narratives on colonial history, legends, and Joola myths, while also learning the Joola language. He cast non-professional actors (Image 1) from the surrounding villages and played the role of a *tirailleur* himself (Image 2), to authentically portray the daily life and spiritual practices of the Joola community, as well as to evoke an episode from his personal experience as a soldier. As he once declared, «During the last World War, those of my age, eighteen, were forced to join the French army».[10] In addition to this colonial memory, *Emitaï* depicts the social architecture of Joola societies, characterised by a lack of hierarchical structure, resistance to authoritarianism, and a deep ritualistic attachment to their identity and to rice cultivation (Diedhiou, 2011). These elements (anti-authoritarianism and the ritualistic connection to rice) do not merely serve as a background but actively shape the film's formal and narrative structure.

Emitaï unfolds through a linear narrative structure, employing natural sound and lighting, and favouring medium and long shots to immerse the viewer in rural life and the psychological states of its characters. It runs for 95 minutes and is divided into two parts: the first, approximately twenty minutes long, centres on the forced conscription of young men from a Joola village; the second focuses on the confiscation of rice and the villagers' resistance, culminating in their collective execution. Sembene initially conceived the script as a film centered on Aline Sitoe Diatta, a prominent figure in the Joola anti-colonial resistance. However, due to the myths surrounding her legacy, the narrative ultimately shifted toward a broader critique of ancestral religion during the colonial struggle. As Sembene stated:

10 Gerald Peary and Patrick McGilligan, 1972, in Busch and Annas, 2008: 49.

> My first thought was to evoke the resistance of a Senegalese heroine named Aline Sitoe [...] However, in my biographical research I realised that the legend had obscured the historical truth and that it would take more work to separate one from the other. And then the mysticism of Aline Sitoe made me sick; I am an atheist and a Marxist. So, I have decided to remove Aline Sitoe from her role as the main character.[11]

Aline Sitoé Diatta was born around 1920-1925 in Kabrousse, Lower Casamance, and is celebrated as a Senegalese national heroine and a symbol of Joola anti-colonial resistance for having led a revolt against the colonial administration. The process of her heroinisation started in the 1980s, when Senegal was reshaping its national history. The context was marked by the absence of historical figures from the Joola community in the national narrative, a gap denounced by Abbé Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, who would later become the ideologue of the secessionist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), founded in 1982. To help end the armed conflict, especially during Abdou Diouf's presidency (1980–2000) and in line with his politics of *sursaut national* (national renewal), a mixed commission was established to conduct research aimed at rehabilitating Aline Sitoé Diatta's figure as a national heroine (Diedhiou, 2019; Diémé and Bâ, 2022). It must be noted that, beyond this nationalist narrative, it is difficult to justify the portrayal of Aline Sitoé Diatta as the historical heroine embodying the unity of the Joola people. The Joola are divided into four main subgroups (Foogny, Karon, Buluf, and Esulala). According to Diedhiou (2023, 420-435), they are a fragmented society in which each group has their own spiritual rituals, historical events, and cultural expressions. Diedhiou highlights the absence of centralised hierarchy within Joola societies, a factor that may have constrained their capacity to organise sustained resistance to colonial occupation. He further notes that, during the colonial campaigns, each village was largely left to defend itself when attacked, while neighbouring communities often remained indifferent or uninvolved. In this sense, despite the dominant rhetoric surrounding the figure of Aline Sitoé Diatta, it is important to acknowledge the limits of her authority and her ability to mobilise neighbouring Joola villages in revolt.

Why, then, was Aline Sitoé Diatta arrested and exiled by colonial authorities? According to Toliver-Diallo (2005), Aline Sitoé Diatta worked as a housemaid in Dakar before returning to Kabrousse in 1942, where she became a prominent figure who presided over spiritual rituals such as *kásarah* and *balibë*, which are part of the cult of rainmaker (to make it rain), which is often associated with women. Known for her abilities as a healer and a rainmaker, Aline Sitoé Diatta attracted a significant number of pilgrims from neighbouring villages who came to attend her rituals, bringing cattle and other valuable gifts (Toliver-Diallo, 2005: 142). Her growing influence alarmed the colonial authorities. At the same time, reports from the period indicate a significant cattle slaughter, but the turning point occurred when a vaccination campaign was sabotaged by local communities and young men began fleeing to neighbouring territories, to avoid conscription

11 *Íbid.*, 25.

(Toliver-Diallo, 2005: 344). Additionally, in October 1942, a group of men from Kabrousse and several other Joola villages attacked a colonial battalion, killing some of its members. Given Aline Sitoé Diatta's rising popularity, the colonial administration accused her of inciting the local population to rebellion. She was subsequently arrested in January 1943 and exiled to Mali, where she died a few years later.

It becomes apparent that the epic of Aline Sitoé—interwoven with legend, mysticism, nationalism, and religious dogmatism—may have proved difficult to integrate into the critical narrative of a Marxist filmmaker like Sembene. He then redirected his focus toward a critique of ancestral beliefs and colonial memory. Paradoxically, to articulate an alternative account of Joola popular narratives, Sembene draws on the legend of Bigolo,[12] an anticolonial warrior and head of the Joola traditional healers in the Séléki region.[13]Why, then, has the legend of Bigolo persisted, while that of Aline Sitoé Diatta has been largely rejected or marginalized? At first glance, it appears that Sembene sought to offer an alternative, gendered perspective on anticolonial struggle, while deliberately avoiding the promotion of the nationalist historiography of the Senegalese administration as well as the secessionist discourses associated with the MFDC.

Sembene connects the story of Bigolo to the 1942 massacre of the inhabitants of a Joola village by French colonial troops for refusing to collaborate in the war effort. In this sense, he engages in the recreation of memory as an act of recollection. The story of Bigolo unfolds as a session of oral storytelling involving an old man and a young primary school boy. Note here that in many African societies, historical events are passed down across generations through oral storytelling, which serves as a crucial medium for preserving and interpreting shared memory. The notes on Bigolo's story open with a schoolboy reading aloud his sixth-grade history lesson about the colonial war in Séléki, in the Casamance region. When he reaches the passage describing Bigolo as «a rebel who was killed while attempting to attack a colonial battalion», the old man interrupts him: «Your book is not telling the truth. I knew your mother's uncle, Bigolo».[14] The narrative then shifts to a storytelling session as the old man recounts his own memories of the events.

> Once again, the white men occupied Séléki. Bigolo, together with the council of traditional spiritual leaders, was preparing offerings to Salignan, the Joola god of abundance. While imparting wisdom to his disciples, a messenger arrived with news of the approaching colonial battalion. Bigolo immediately ceased the sacrificial rituals to confront the invaders and defend his community. Despite his age, his commitment to his village and people remained unwavering. He dismissed the

12 See Sembene's Archives, Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington, Box 1, Subseries *Emitaï*.

13 Sembene's unpublished handwritten notes collected during extensive fieldwork, housed in his archives, provide details about the legend of Bigolo. These materials shed light on the figure of Bigolo, who is remembered for his resistance against colonial forces in 1886. This oral legend notably inspired the character of Djimeko and informs the film's engagement with ancestral memory and anti-colonial resistance.

14 Original notes in French. All translations into English are the author's own.

council of traditional healers, rallied the villagers, and led them into battlefield.[15]

Sembene contrasts the authority of the old man with that of the official historian, juxtaposing popular history with the institutionalised narrative. The old man recounts how Bigolo and his companions sang warrior songs before attacking the colonial battalion, during which he was fatally wounded. Bigolo is portrayed as a hero not only for confronting the white man but also for refusing to offer sacrifices to the Joola deity. Sembene merges popular history with his own reimagining of colonial struggle, assigning to both the old man and the young boy the role of custodians of collective memory. He uses cinema to present the old man as a popular historian who can challenge the colonial historiography taught in postcolonial schools. This popular account of colonial memory, collected during Sembene's fieldwork and reflected in the early script of *Emitaï*, has been mistakenly used by some scholars, such as Vieyra (1972/2012), instead of the final version of the script or the film itself, in which the character of Bigolo is replaced by that of Djimeko. Rather than simply retrieving a factual account, in *Emitaï*, Sembene reconstructs the past through a creative engagement with oral traditions, local myths, and political critique. Djimeko's character embodies the idea that recollection is never a mere reproduction of the past, but a re-figuration shaped by narrative and imagination (Ricoeur, 2004: 52).

In drawing on popular oral traditions to construct the character of Djimeko, Sembene also demonstrates that history is mediated through the creative imagination of the artist (Achebe, 1988). It is worth recalling that, for Achebe, artistic creation is a process of becoming and a form of praxis. In this regard, the construction of Djimeko's character functions as both a critique of colonial narratives and an affirmation of art as an act of historical reimagining. Sembene also inaugurates, with *Emitaï*, a new approach to reinterpreting the role of spiritual power during colonialism. He articulates this stance succinctly: «The gods never prevented colonialism from establishing itself; they strengthened us for inner resistance but not for armed resistance. When the enemy is right there, he must be fought with weapons».[16] This assertion articulates both the film's central argument and Sembene's ideological impetus—his underlying political and philosophical motivations—thereby reaffirming his authorial presence within his text.

15 *Íbid.*

16 Sembene made this statement in a 1976 interview with Noureddine Ghali, and his position was at odds with the prevailing narrative on the history of Africa. Busch and Annas (80)

4. RECALLING COLONIAL VIOLENCE, SIMULACRUM, AND PROPAGANDA

Image 3. Two young boys who play the role of witnesses in the film. Screenshot from *Emitaï* (1971).

In a pivotal early scene of Emitaï, the viewer is confronted with the violent, forced conscription of young men. A group of tirailleurs emerges from the bush to arrest a young man.[17] The screen cuts to portray two boys hiding in the undergrowth, witnessing the brutal aggression. They wear traditional Joola white caps (Image 3), which symbolise that they have not yet undergone the initiation rites of circumcision and the waana,[18] also called bois sacré. The presence of these young boys in the film serves as a powerful metaphor for oral storytelling, mirroring the boy who listens to the epic of Bigolo discussed above. It also underscores the testimonial role of youth and the impact of historical events on younger generations. As Sembene explains: «It's from my childhood. I saw scenes like that as a child. That's why I put them there; that's why they are witnesses».[19] These boys may be able to write their own version of the history, just as Sembene did. Their presence reflects Sembene's belief in the continuity between artistic creation, collective memory, and recollection.

17 The conscription of indigenous soldiers into the French colonial army began on 21 July 1857, when Napoleon III issued a decree establishing an indigenous infantry corps in Senegal, known as the tirailleurs sénégalais. This unit was conceived as a key instrument for advancing France's imperial expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. By 1916, the escalating demands of the First World War led to intensified recruitment propaganda. These campaigns, often characterised by coercion and violence, triggered widespread resistance and numerous uprisings among the colonised populations (Clarke, 1986).

18 The *waana* is a mandinka word that refers to an ancestral initiation process marking the passage of young boys into manhood. This practice is common among the Joola, Mandinka, Wolof and other groups in West Africa.

19 Weaver, 1980: 15.

In a subsequent scene, the viewer is confronted with colonial brutality and violence. A Black sergeant intimidates and tortures Kabebe, an elderly man whose son has refused to enlist. The scene exposes how colonialism coerces local populations and exploits familial bonds to assert power and enforce compliance. A medium low angle shot captures Kabebe as he lies bound on the ground before the community, lifting his gaze to meet that of the soldier. A close-up of his face emphasises the psychological torment inflicted upon him (Image 4). Kabebe's frantic glances convey deep shame, mirrored in the anxious and disheartened expressions of the onlooking villagers. As the torture continues, two women step out from the crowd. We see them jump into a small local fishing boat, which they then steer through the swamp vegetation in search of Kabebe's son. In the initial script, one of the women is identified as Aline Sitoe Diatta, reflecting her leadership role within the community. In the final version of the screenplay, however, her name is omitted, signalling Sembene's thematic shift. As the young man refuses to conscript, the women urge him to return to the village to rescue his father. «You will not be killed in their war, and we will take care of the children and ourselves», they insist.[20]

Once freed, Kabebe joins the village elders under the palaver tree, smoking and drinking palm wine as they discuss the unfolding tragedy. They pour drops onto the ground, emphasising the religious ritual and cultural significance of the moment.[21] By depicting this intimate moment, Sembene underscores the spiritual dimension of collective resistance, highlighting how the community draws strength from its ancestral and cultural heritage. Djimeko, the leader of the group, voices the collective anxiety and the existential threat posed by the forced conscription of young men, whose labor is vital for the community. A tracking shot then transports us to the colonial headquarters. Through a wide-angle shot, we see the conscripts assembled, poised to receive a welcome speech from the *Commandant de Cercle,* their new commanding authority: «You are volunteers. The man behind me [the camera smoothly moves to capture a poster of Marshal Pétain] is the leader of France; he is our father…» His speech mirrors the false narrative of loyalty and duty toward the colonial regime. In this scene, Sembene ironically exposes colonial propaganda (Bouchard, 2023) to demonstrate how it manipulates the emotions of the colonised. Sembene's use of irony to critique colonial propaganda is particularly evident in a scene where a poster of Marshal Pétain is replaced by one of General De Gaulle. In a striking extra-narrative gesture, Sembene casts himself in the film, portraying the very role he once held in the colonial army (Image 2). We see him asking Sergeant Diatta about the man on the new poster. When Diatta responds that General De Gaulle is the new leader of France, Sembene laughs while making a comment in broken French: «C'est couillonner nous?» (*Is it foolish of us?*), highlighting the absurdity that a general

20 In the early script, the young man is Aline Sitoé Diatta's husband, while the other young, mute woman is the young man's sister. This detail is not clearly explained in the film itself.

21 The pouring of a few drops of beer on the ground before drinking is a powerful gesture deeply rooted in African ancestral beliefs. This ritualistic offering symbolizes the connection to their ancestors, seeking their vital force, guidance, and protection in times of crisis.

could command a marshal. This satirical portrayal of French colonial propaganda likely contributed to the diplomatic backlash, leading to the film's censorship in several former colonies, which Sembene denounced:

> We tried to show *Emitaï* in Guadeloupe, but the ambassador from France interceded. The film had one night of exhibition in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) but never again. When I was invited by the government and students of the Ivory Coast to show it, *Emitaï* was first screened the night before by a censor board of eight Africans and two Frenchmen. The eight were in agreement, but the two Frenchmen went to the French ambassador, who went to see the head of the government. I was told that it wasn't an «opportune time» to show this film.[22]

Faced with this neocolonial censorship, Sembene addressed a letter to the Société d'Exploitation Cinématographique Africaine (SECMA) on 22 June 1973.[23] In the letter, he denounced what he referred to as a sabotage of his work by the French neocolonial network.

Beyond the satirical depiction of French colonial potentates, Sembene shows in Emitaï how language can be weaponised to reinforce the ideology of white supremacism on one hand and African «backwardness» on the other hand. He also uses language to turn the Black soldiers into passive instruments of the very empire that oppressed them. Here, the stark linguistic divide reflects the colonial hierarchy, as the French officers speak standard French, the language of power and authority, while the African villagers converse in Joola, and the *tirailleurs sénégalais* communicate in an imposed broken French known as *petit nègre*. The *petit nègre* was an artificial pidgin, developed and institutionalised by the French colonial administration, that served as a tool to infantilise African soldiers and limit their ability to articulate complex thought, reinforcing racist stereotypes of intellectual inferiority. As Couturier (1920) observed in her study of the French language used by the *tirailleurs* during the First World War, the *petit nègre* was not merely a linguistic adaptation but a deliberate mechanism of propaganda, used to delineate social hierarchies within the colonial army. By depicting this manipulation of language, Sembene also lays the groundwork for his own intervention as a witness to history, intertwining his personal memory as a colonial soldier with the collective memory of the Joola people. In the pivotal scene where Sembene appears clad in a *tirailleur* uniform and speaking broken French, the viewer discovers how language and image function as central mechanisms of colonial propaganda.

Sembene demonstrates how memory can become a powerful lens through which shared historical trauma is articulated. This illustrates Ricoeur's claim that individual memory always exists in the orbit of collective memory and that the testimony of a single life contributes to shaping a broader historical narrative (Ricoeur, 2004: 92–93). In this regard, the posters of Pétain and De Gaulle, displayed and commented on by indigenous soldiers in colonial pidgin French,

22 Peary and McGilligan, 1972: 45.
23 Ousmane Sembene Archives, Lilly Library, Box 1, Subseries *Emitaï*, Correspondence and Contracts, 1971-1973.

function as potent metaphors of this ideological contrast. These posters serve as symbolic devices that stand in for an absent imperial authority. This critique is extended in a subsequent scene: a wide long shot introduces the colonial headquarters in Ziguinchor, followed by a medium shot of the colonel's office, prominently decorated with emblems of French imperial power—most notably, a bust of Marie Antoinette draped in the French flag. These elements underscore the symbolic artifice of empire and the performativity of colonial representation. The viewer is invited to witness a conversation between two colonial officers. The dialogue culminates in an order from the Colonel: «Collect as much rice as possible to supply the troops and restore order». The scene transitions to a wide shot of rice fields, visually celebrating the harvest as a symbol of imperial resource extraction and control.

Image 4. Kabebe, being threatened by sergeant Diatta. Screenshot from *Emitaï* (1971).

Back in the village, news of the impending colonial intervention spreads through the sounds of horns and drums. This intermediality underscores the function of art objects not merely as artistic expressions but as strategic tools mobilised by the community in their struggle against colonial invaders. In a juxtaposed sequence, women are shown rushing into the forest to hide the rice, while the elders retreat to the sacred grove to seek the protection of their gods. The sacred forest—traditionally a site of refuge and connection to ancestral forces—thus becomes a space for existential reflection in the face of colonial intrusion. These scenes vividly illustrate the ancestral and spiritual rootedness of Joola cultural resistance and collective struggle. Sembene emphasises their reliance on ancestral modes of communication and spiritual practices in confronting external threats. In this context, rice symbolises not only the village's sustenance but also its deep attachment to ancestral spirituality as well as to the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual roles of women (Diedhiou, 2019; 2023). By showing women taking

responsibility for hiding the rice, Sembene foregrounds their agency and active participation in resisting colonial appropriation, while the elders, particularly the men, are portrayed through the lens of their religious and spiritual authority.

Sembene foregrounds Joola material culture by meticulously constructing mise-en-scène around traditional tools and art objects, elevating them from functional artefacts to potent visual signifiers of cultural continuity and resilience. He displays emblematic objects such as the *ŋantang* (a carved calabash used for collecting palm sap), the *ndyàng* (a woven basket for transporting seeds or harvested crops), and the *kadiandou* (a farming artefact made of a metal blade with a long wooden handle). His use of medium shots and slow motion transcends mere ethnographic observation, producing an aesthetic that is both lyrical and politically charged. Sembene justified this stylistic choice by emphasising the necessity of slowness to draw attention to the beauty of the environment and the cultural richness of the Joola people. As he remarked, «Each shot includes something which lets them (the Joola) see for themselves that their country is very beautiful».[24] This formal strategy also functions as a mode of counter-discourse, contesting colonial visual regimes that historically exoticized African art, epistemologies, and cultural practices.

Sembene also incorporates a bicycle into the film to provide multiple layers of interpretation of the socioeconomic conditions in Joola society. Considering that material objects often serve as social markers, the man riding the bicycle may be read as representing a higher socio-economic stratum. Within the context of the film, the bicycle signals not only economic capital but also a degree of social distinction. However, this status is abruptly undermined when he is stopped and conscripted by a colonial soldier, revealing the fragility of class privilege under the arbitrary violence of colonial authority. Rather than symbolising the imposition of Western modernity, here, the bicycle is reframed as a representation of local experience within global patterns of ingenuity. Indeed, the bicycle conveys a vision of plural and decolonised modernity—one that does not reject external influences wholesale but rather integrates them on culturally meaningful terms. Sembene can be seen as not only recuperating African art from exoticising and primitivist frameworks but also constructing an alternative cinematic discourse grounded in cultural nationalism, one that affirms the dignity, creativity, and historical agency of rural African communities and positions them as active agents in the construction of their own modernity.

5. FAITH, COLONIAL OPPRESSION, AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

In the scenes depicting the gathering of men in the sacred forest, the viewer is immersed in both ritual practice and communal deliberation, as the elders seek the protection of the gods in response to the mounting demands of colonial authority. Sembene exposes a central tension between spiritual belief and political action.

24 Weaver, 1980: 15.

The dialogue reveals deep divisions within the community: Djimeko, the leader, denounces forced conscription and the requisitioning of rice. He calls for armed resistance, but his stance meets opposition. Kabebe and Antaï insist on seeking divine protection, advocating spiritual submission over physical confrontation. This division within the council leaves Djimeko isolated. He leads a small group of men, armed with traditional weapons, but is ultimately shot and fatally wounded. The portrayal of Djimeko's death is marked by striking simplicity, especially when compared to the legendary narrative of Bigolo's resistance. Unlike Bigolo, whose story is often cast in heroic terms, Djimeko is denied such mythic elevation—though he remains revered and accorded a measure of heroism. This contrast may reflect Sembene's Marxist critique of religion and hero-worship: «I am personally an opponent to all religions».[25] It can be argued that, by omitting key elements of the Bigolo legend, Sembene avoids constructing a counter-myth. Instead, he grounds the narrative in the materiality of struggle, emphasizing collective agency over spiritual redemption.

Image 5. Women are sitting on the ground, surrounded by soldiers. *Emitaï* (1971).

The manner in which Djimeko is killed and his people are defeated underscores a historical fact: colonialism triumphed because the colonisers were better equipped than their opponents. Yet Sembene does not overlook the courage and determination of the Joola in defending themselves. At the same time, he highlights the ambivalence of their resistance by reflecting their reliance on supernatural powers embedded within their cultural and spiritual framework. This narrative resonates with Sembene's declarations: «it belongs to the people to decide their own destiny, not the gods».[26] This perspective is embodied in

25 Hennebelle, 1971: 22.
26 *Íbid*.

Djimeko's rejection of religious fatalism, a figure through whom Sembene critiques the elders' dependence on divine intervention in times of struggle. As Sembene remarked: «During the period of passive resistance against colonisation, religions were sometimes able to keep the flames of popular resistance alive, but in my film the fetishes rather animate resignation».[27] Sembene presents a derisive and grotesque image of the elders as they seek divine intervention, thereby critiquing the nationalist narrative of anticolonial struggle that often emphasizes the passive resistance of Senegalese Muslim leaders.

In a pivotal scene set in the sacred forest, the viewer is drawn into a ritual in which Kabebe sacrifices a red rooster to introduce Djimeko's spirit to the ancestral deities. His ritual is followed by a mystical dialogue in which cosmic forces come into play. Djimeko's spirit encounters the gods and questions them about the calamity: «Why this grim fate?» The gods accuse him of defying their authority by failing to obey their demands and perform the appropriate offerings. Djimeko responds by invoking the many sacrifices already made and pointing out the gods' selfish attitudes: «Don't you see the village is dying?» The dialogue ends with Djimeko being sentenced to death. His final assertion reads almost like a staunch Marxist declaration: «I have become a danger to you… I will die — fine. But you too, with me, will die». Sembene portrays the gods as childish, petty, and unreasonable: «What I wanted to show in *Emitaï* was that the gods could no longer respond to the people's needs».[28] This artistic stance resonates with Achebe's view of the role of art in relation to the obsolescence of tradition and ancestral beliefs. For Achebe, «even gods could fall out of use, and new forms must stand ready to be called into being as often as new (threatening) forces appear on the scene… [Man] should be able to challenge them» (Achebe, 1988: 63). For both Sembene and Achebe, the value of art relies in its capacity to challenge even the sacred.

Sembene interrogates the internal cultural logics that may impede resistance and social transformation. While the gods are invoked through complex and esoteric rituals to foreground Joola ancestral spirituality, their failure to provide concrete solutions to the crisis renders them politically ineffective. As their authority collapses, their very existence becomes an obstacle to the anticolonial struggle. The crisis intensifies when the Commandant de Cercle interrupts the burial ritual and confiscates Djimeko's body to coerce the villagers into surrendering their rice. Here the viewer realises that despite their apparent authority, the men cannot act without the consent of the women. In a desperate attempt to resolve the crisis, they proceed with another offering: a black goat is sacrificed to appease the gods' anger. This gesture, rooted in local cosmogony and spirituality, also evokes a «scapegoat» mechanism (Girard, 1979). Through this ritual, the elders attempt to resolve the crisis via symbolic expulsion. They transfer the community's transgressions onto the goat. However, the colonial threat persists, the deeper moral decay remains unresolved, and the community stays paralysed.

27 Weaver, 1980: 22

28 Nourreddine Ghali, 1972. Interview with Ousmane Sembene, in Busch and Annas, 2008: 81.

This impasse reveals a deep sociocultural tension. Sembene's message is that while ritual and symbolic authority is vested in the men, the capacity for decisive action now rests with the women. The true transgression, then, lies not in the potential surrender of rice but in the inability of the men to resolve the impasse. The central dilemma—whether to yield to colonial demands, thereby violating ancestral norms and principles, or to expose the community to further physical violence and repression—lays bare the limitations of masculine authority sanctioned by tradition. Sembene reflects this traditional, interdependent social structure by showing how the authority to act shifts to women when the men are forced to retrieve the rice. As Sembene himself once declared: «I wanted to oppose the propensity of men to subordination (under the cover of god's desires) to the strong desire of human resistance of women».[29] In doing so, he underscores how colonial violence disrupts, yet simultaneously reveals, the adaptive resilience of Joola communal life.

Image 6. Women carrying a sheaf on their heads and the corpse of the young boy killed by the soldiers in their arms, *Emitaï* (1971).

Kabebe, who replaces Djimeko as the new leader following traditional age-based succession, poignantly articulates collective anxiety: «We no longer know whether we are alive or dead». His statement is echoed by Calcum, another member of the council, who adds, «Our beliefs and ways of life have been challenged since the day white men built their church». This scene recalls a passage in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when Obierika laments to Okonkwo the irreversible

29 Guy Hennebelle, We Are Governed in Black Africa by Colonialism's Disabled Children (1971): 24.

erosion and decadence of traditional structures: «It is already too late,' said Obierika sadly. 'Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion, and they help to uphold his government… What of our own people who are following their way and have been given power?» (Achebe, 1994, 153). In *Emitaï*, as in *Things Fall Apart*, it becomes clear that the breakdown of tradition is not imposed solely from outside; it is reinforced by those within who adopt and reproduce the mechanisms of violence imported by the coloniser. Sembene depicts this phenomenon through the figure of the black soldiers. The character of sergeant Diatta (Image 4) shows the dehumanisation of the Black man transformed into a mercenary and reduced to the status of a thing, an animal. Sembene himself declared, «We see the sergeant, for example, as an obedient dog. He doesn't even have a name; his name is Sergeant, like a dog». [30] The sergeant also embodies the fragmentation of the Joola community in the face of French aggression. In this regard, Sembene shows not only how some Africans actively participated in the conquest and exploitation of the continent but also how they were often indifferent to the suffering of other Africans. In doing so, he points out the complex dynamics of collaboration, complicity, and resistance within colonised societies, emphasising their internal fractures.

Colonialism is a complex system of domination that operates not only through physical violence but also through the manipulation of belief, the co-optation of local authority, and the reordering of the social structures of the colonized. Sembene illustrates this phenomenon in the scene where the soldiers confront the men's inability to surrender the rice without the women's consent. Having observed the impossibility of imposing their will, the lieutenant proposes appointing a new local chief. The commandant, a veteran of the colonial army, dismisses the idea as a «traditional cliché», adding: «any colonial appointee would be immediately killed by the community». This dialogue shows Sembene's concerns with reflecting the Joola's political organization, in which leadership is situational rather than vertically imposed, and legitimacy is derived from communal recognition rather than external authority. Sembene himself remarked: «One becomes a chief when there is a need». [31] This idea is vividly reflected in a pivotal scene in which a man approaches the soldiers in an effort to free his family. He decides on his own, to deliver his share of rice without consulting either the elders or his wives. His attempt, however, proves futile, as his wife refuses to abandon the other women held in captivity. This scene reveals both the man's freedom to make decisions and the woman's equal freedom to accept or reject them. Such absence of hierarchical authority is effectively exploited by the colonisers. The man is then arrested by the soldiers and coerced into betraying his community, ultimately leading to calamity as he reveals the location of the hidden rice. Here, Sembene underscores the extent to which Joola society was founded on the autonomy of families and communities, highlighting the difficulty of reproducing any hierarchy based on obedience to a single man or imposed

30 Weaver, 1980: 28.
31 *Íbid.*: 24.

authority. In parallel to this, the colonial command is depicted as a macabre mise-en-scène of the white man's authority and violence that should be dismantled.

This idea of dismantling this colonial structure takes narrative form toward the film's ending, when a colonial soldier kills one of the young boys. From this scene onward, the viewer is caught in a deliberate reversal of gender roles. Juxtaposed shots show men carrying sacks of rice (Image 7)—a task traditionally performed by women—while women assume responsibility for the funeral rites (Image 6), typically led by male elders. The mise-en-scène of this gender reversal is intensified as a long shot depicts the women carrying the dead boy, wrapped in a red cloth, each with a sheaf of rice balanced on her head. The red cloth evokes the spiritual dimension of society and the sacrifice of their sons, while the sheaves of rice symbolize the women's central role in the economic and social life of the community. This visual composition reinforces women's sorority and sense of responsibility in a moment of communal crisis (Image 5). Their determined advance unnerves the colonial soldiers guarding Djimeko's body, who ultimately retreat and abandon their position, allowing the women to continue the funeral rituals. With the men absent, the young boy takes on the masculine dimension of the ritual. He accompanies the women and remains at the center of the circle next to the bodies, granted visual and spatial prominence—a form of masculine centrality—within the spiritual affairs of the community. When the men hear the dirge, they abruptly halt and set down their baskets of rice. The screen fades to black, leaving the audience immersed in the evocative sounds of gunfire and the victims' cries.

Image 7. Men transporting the rice from the bush. Screenshot *Emitaï* (1971)

Emitaï represents a radical shift in Sembene's cinematic approach. The film offers a critical recollection of colonial memory from a gendered perspective, positioning women as central actors in the anti-colonial struggle. This portrayal reflects the evolution of Sembene's feminist militancy (Pfaff, 1981; 1984; Jenis, 2008). We should not forget that in his earlier films (*Borom Sarret*, 1963; *Niaye*, 1964; *Mandabi*, 1968; and *Taw*, 1970), women often appear as peripheral figures, constrained by patriarchal structures and subordinated to the divine mandate or masculine authority. Their roles are largely confined to the domestic sphere. In *Emitaï*, however, both the gods and the men are shown as ineffectual or complicit. In contrast, the women emerge as the driving force of resistance and collective renewal, revalorising female agency within the broader anti-colonial struggle. In this regard, *Emitaï* is a visionary narrative of feminist resistance and social reconfiguration, offering what Uru Iyam calls «a reevaluation of the female role» (Iyam, 1986: 82).

6. CONCLUSION

This study has repositioned *Emitaï* within the broader post-independence context, moving beyond the binary opposition between Western cinema and what was expected to constitute African cinema on one hand, and between Sembene's Marxist and revolutionary artistic project and Senghorian Négritude ideology on the other. It offers an alternative approach to Sembene's cinema that escapes the reductive tradition-versus-modernity framework. The analysis demonstrates that while Sembene delivers a sharp critique of colonial narratives and propaganda and rejects the nationalist idealisation of Africa's past and ancestral legacy, he is not entirely divorced from the cultural nationalism of his time. Moreover, Sembene's approach can be understood as a method of «liberating the image» of Africa by shaping a new cinematic gaze. In this sense, *Emitaï* exemplifies the idea that the gaze is always a deliberate choice when creating an image. Given the long history of Western representations of Africa, the gaze in *Emitaï* becomes a deliberate site for generating a moving archive—one capable of shaping memory and sustaining struggle.

Emitaï not only recalls the anticolonial struggle but also underscores the imperative of restoring Africa's image in a genuine manner—one that engages with its beauty and its ugliness, its multiple heroes, and its inherent contradictions. The film reveals Sembene's engagement with ancestral legacy alongside the transition to a new relational framework, in which art, tradition, and spirituality reinforce the agency of Africans and their capacity to rebuild a society founded on equality and justice. In this regard, the film's central argument is that African art and collective memory are not fixed repositories of cultural authenticity but contested sites open to critical reinterpretation. From this perspective, Sembene depicts a gendered mode of survival within the Joola traditional community, which is beset by colonial aggression and violence. *Emitaï* thus presents a vision of the complementary roles that men and women can play in the collective interest.

For instance, the men's delay in surrendering the rice stems from their recognition of the women's labor in producing it. Their spiritual efforts are aimed at finding a solution that does not forfeit this toil by giving away the food. When the men stop midway upon hearing the dirge, it is because they are needed at home to lead the burial rites and cannot abandon this role to the women. They are ultimately killed for this decisive, collective refusal to relinquish their traditional responsibilities during such a crucial communal occasion

Sembene transforms African art and collective memory into objects of cinematic historiography, stripping both of their sacred aura. In *Emitaï*, art no longer functions as a ritual artefact, nor memory as an unquestionable account of the past. Instead, they become elements of a secular cinematic critique that invites viewers to reconsider how African art and collective memory are continually interpreted and reinterpreted. The film thus operates as a cautionary tale about mnemonic practice—not only for Senegal but for the continent more broadly. This is because Sembene uses art to warn against the mystification of the "past" and the uncritical reverence for tradition. His approach to tradition remains ambivalent: while he acknowledges and criticises the cultural and spiritual resonance of figures such as Aline Sitoé Diatta and Bigolo, he reorients these legacies toward a pedagogical purpose. In doing so, he destabilizes romanticised understandings of collective memory and mainstream nationalist history, opening space for alternative cinematic interpretations of history and cultural meaning within a context shaped by postcolonial nation-building. Sembene's aim is to equip Africans with both theoretical and practical tools for an emancipatory struggle that resists colonial rationality as well as the postcolonial propaganda and its constraining elements of inherited traditions. He demonstrates that staging memory, tradition, and identity involves the complex work of rewriting the past while insisting on the necessity of critical transformation. In this sense, *Emitaï* stands as a challenge to both colonial violence and the inertia of ancestral legacy, offering a mode of African cinema that is politically engaged, historically conscious, and artistically innovative.

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