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"Adapting film to the rhythms of Senegalese culture and to the needs of its people, Ousmane Sembène has shown himself to be a true believer in the didactic role of cinema as a tool for self-examination, self-actualization, and social change. . . . In Sembène's view, African filmmakers have great responsibility to their communities. Their function is comparable to that of the traditional African *griot* – the storyteller and chronicler who records and interprets the history and culture of his people."

– Françoise Pfaff

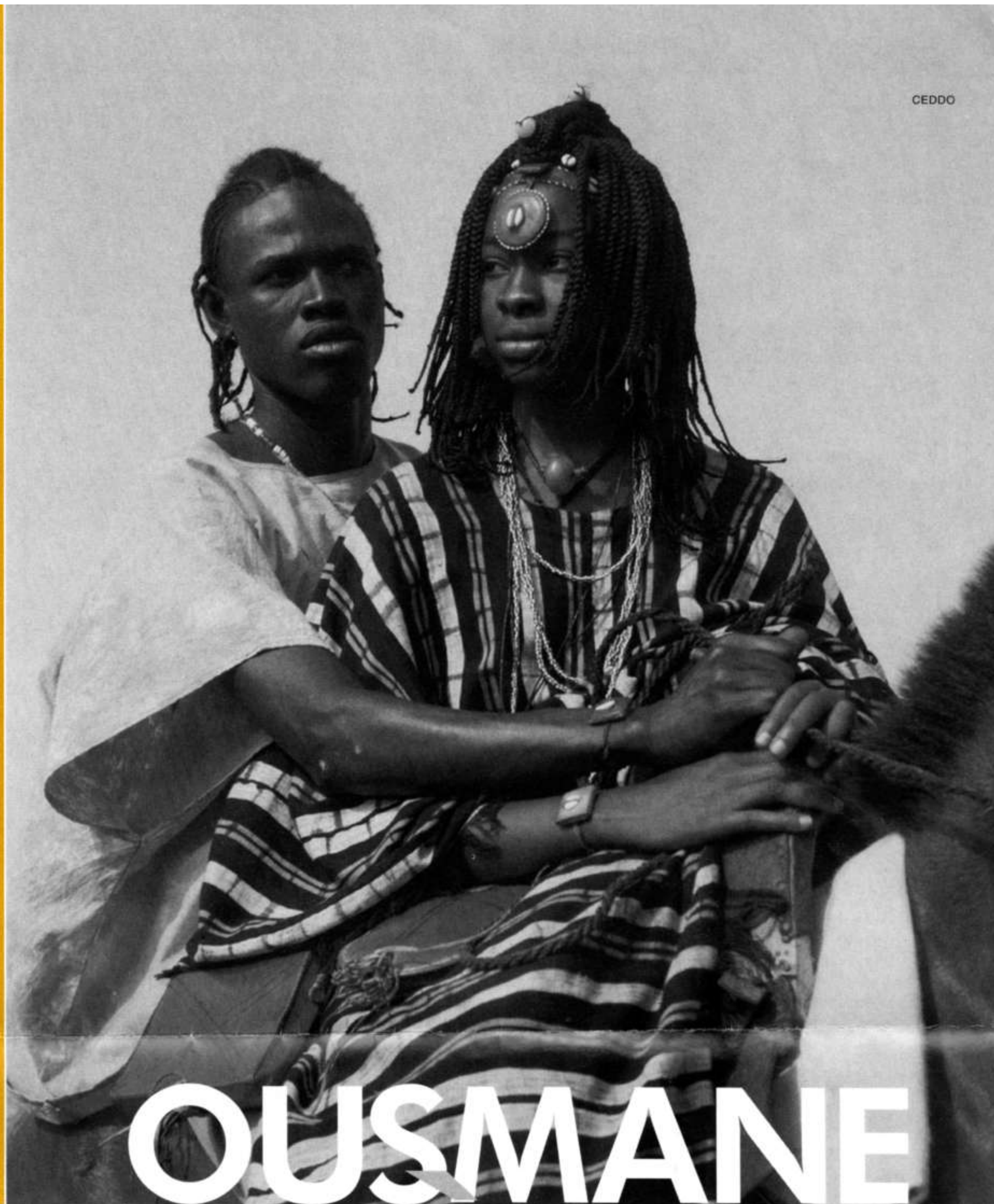
"No filmmaker of any time or place has achieved quite the same quintessential role as artistic spokesman of his nation."

– Tom Allen, *The Village Voice*

"Sembène is the African Molière."

– *Newsweek*

Cinematheque Ontario is delighted to have an opportunity to present this Ousmane Sembène retrospective comprised of all new 35mm prints. We extend our thanks to New Yorker Films for their assistance with this retrospective.



OUSMANE SEMBÈNE

PIONEER OF AFRICAN CINEMA

Often referred to as the "pioneer" or "dean" of African Cinema, Sembène gained international recognition in 1966, when he was awarded the Jean Vigo Prize at Cannes for *BLACK GIRL*. His films have influenced several generations of African filmmakers and allowed viewers in many parts of the world to gain greater insight into Senegalese culture. Known as a talented writer and novelist before he turned his attention to filmmaking at age forty, Sembène was motivated to make films in order to reach a wider audience in African countries, where high illiteracy rates prevented his books from receiving wider circulation. Not only did Sembène succeed in this regard, but his pioneering work as a filmmaker has helped foster a strong cinematic tradition in Senegal.

Sembène came to filmmaking with rich life experiences. Born in the Casamance region of southern Senegal, Sembène is of Lebu origin and Muslim faith. Largely self-educated, he held a variety of jobs in his teens (construction worker, mechanic) and was involved with an amateur theatre group. Sembène was drafted into the French army in 1939 and joined the Free French forces in 1942, fighting on the European front in France and Germany: some of his wartime experiences are reflected in *EMITAÏ* and *CAMP DE THIAROYE*. Following the war, he became active in union politics, joining the Dakar-Niger railroad strike; and, later, as a shipyard union activist in Marseilles. In 1956, he published his first book, *Le dockeur noir*, based on his experiences as a longshoreman. By the early sixties, Sembène was already widely known as a novelist, in particular, for his masterful *Les bouts de bois*

de Dieu (1960), which received praise from Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. After Sembène resolved to become a filmmaker, he was able to land a scholarship from the Soviet Union to spend a year in Moscow training at the Gorki Studios with Mark Donskoi and Sergei Gerassimov.

Sembène's cinema is about Senegal coming into its own as a nation; it addresses the growing pains associated with political independence and analyzes the variety of external influences on the country's history prior to independence. A number of Sembène's films deal with French colonial domination and its legacy (*BLACK GIRL*, *EMITAÏ*, *CAMP DE THIAROYE*) or the historical influence of Islam and Christianity on the region (*CEDDO*, *GUELWAAR*). Others offer social commentaries on contemporary Senegalese life and explore tensions between African traditions and values inherited from the West (*MANDABI*, *XALA*, *FAAT-KINE*). Over the years, certain films have been censored or banned temporarily by the Senegalese government (*XALA*, *CEDDO*) for being too critical of the government or of Islam, the country's primary religious group.

Shaped by the school of Soviet social realism, Sembène's cinema is always rooted in social commentary whatever its style or genre: historical drama, political satire, or folklore-comedy. Underpinning all of Sembène's cinema is a clairvoyant sense of responsibility. Sembène upholds his role as *griot* or chronicler of the people's history and he expects viewers to be responsive to the call for social change.

– SUSAN OXTOBY

Cinematheque Ontario; Vol 12, #2, Winter 2002 Programme Guide



BLACK GIRL

ALL NEW 35MM PRINTS!

BLACK GIRL (LA NOIRE DE...)

Director: Ousmane Sembène • Senegal 1965 60 minutes • Cast: Mbissine Therese Diop, Anne-Marie Jelinck

A landmark film which addresses attitudes of racism in post-colonial Africa, **BLACK GIRL** is considered Africa's first dramatic feature film and won Sembène the 1966 Jean Vigo Prize at Cannes. (The film's visual style is reminiscent of the French New Wave.) Based on Sembène's novel *Voltaique*, **BLACK GIRL** tells a story of the exile and despair of a Senegalese domestic servant, Diouana (Mbissine Therese Diop), who is taken to the Riviera by her French employers. Mistreated and abused by the Madame, Diouana feels her life has been reduced to that of a slave, her personal freedoms denied. In an act of resistance, Diouana decides to take her own life. "There are few endings in all of cinema as powerful and rich as this – brimming with tragic wisdom and latent meaning, with finality and promise, with humor and pain. . . . It is at this point that African cinema begins. *****" (Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*).

preceded by



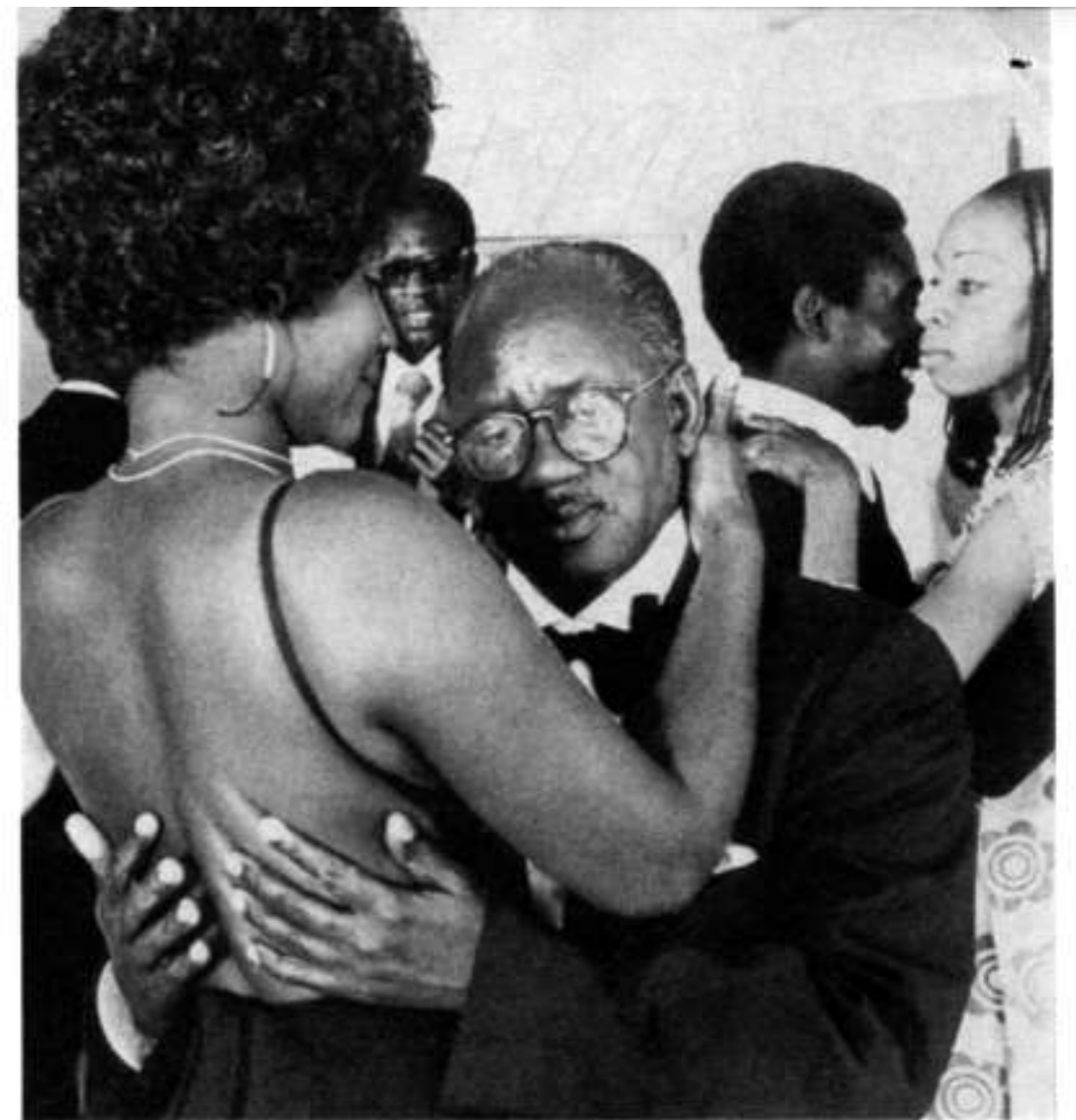
BOROM SARRET

BOROM SARRET

Director: Ousmane Sembène
Senegal 1964 20 minutes • Cast: Ly Abdoulaye

A poignant essay of a man (Ly Abdoulaye) who earns his livelihood as a *borom sarret*, a cart driver, in the poorer sections of Dakar. His passengers include an old woman, a man transporting his dead child to a cemetery, and a pregnant woman on her way to the hospital. Ly's cart is confiscated by the police when an affluent customer convinces him to drive through the district of Dakar where horse-drawn carts are forbidden. "Sembène has written between the lines of his dispassionately told story an unmistakably fierce political message. . . . Sembène's picture of the degradation of modern African life is absorbed into a cunning allegorical structure" (*Monthly Film Bulletin*). **BOROM SARRET** reveals "a uniqueness that is non-Western, non-European and non-conventional, signalling a different mode of representation, and introducing indigenous aesthetics" (Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike).

Friday, February 22 6:30 p.m.



XALA

XALA

Director: Ousmane Sembène
Senegal 1974 123 minutes
Cast: Thierno Leye, Seum Samb, Younoussé Seye

"Ousmane Sembène has created one of the most sophisticated works of the new African cinema – at once comic satire and a deadly accurate polemic against the black bourgeoisie of Dakar" (Albert Johnson). Heavily censored in Senegal, **XALA** strips bare the myth of African independence and exposes ways in which ruling-class Senegalese have appropriated for themselves colonial bureaucratic structures. El Hadji (Thierno Leye) is an aging affluent businessman who is about to marry his third wife. But on his wedding night, he is struck with the curse of *xala* (impotence). His physical affliction soon affects all aspects of his life. *Xala* becomes a metaphor for what's wrong with contemporary Senegalese culture and what paralyzes much of modern Africa. A satirical mix of Senegalese superstitions and customs with Western symbolism and values, **XALA** is reminiscent of Luis Buñuel's use of surrealism.

Sunday, February 24 3:00 p.m.

CEDDO

Director: Ousmane Sembène
Senegal 1977 120 minutes
Cast: Tabara Ndiaye, Moustapha Yade

"Ousmane Sembène . . . has given Black Africa a national film epic in **CEDDO**. Combining high pageantry with raw politics, he gives cinematic form to the ancient verbal tradition by which history, culture and myth are transmitted. The tale is a period piece set in a feudal village suffering the dual threats of Moslem expansion and French slave traders. The royal family have converted to Islam while the *ceddo*, or common people, cling to their customs and fetishistic religion. A champion of the *ceddo* engineers the kidnapping of a Moslem princess, activating a militant confrontation. In the guise of a dynamic political thriller, **CEDDO** takes on a number of taboo subjects – the Islamic influence in Senegal, certain African support for the slave trade to the West, the traditionally low status of women – becoming a reflection on all forms of colonialism in Africa. Ironically, the film was banned in Senegal, ostensibly because Sembène refused to spell the title (pronounced Ched-doe) in the European manner (i.e. Cedo)" (Pacific Film Archive). The film's innovative musical score is composed by Manu Dibango.

Tuesday, February 26 6:30 p.m.



MANDABI

MANDABI (THE MONEY ORDER)

Director: Ousmane Sembène • Senegal 1968 90 minutes • Cast: Mamadou Guye, Ynousse N'Diaye

Sembène's second feature, **MANDABI**, is a folk-comedy set in contemporary Dakar. Ibrahima Dieng (Mamadou Guye) is a middle-aged Muslim man with two wives and seven children. One day he receives a money order for 25,000 francs from his nephew in Paris, accompanied by a letter with specific instructions as to what is to be done with the funds. News of the money order spreads quickly through the neighbourhood and soon Ibrahima's home is teeming with interested parties. Ibrahima is faced with the dilemma that he can't cash the money order until he gets an identity card, a process that leads him through many layers of red tape and bureaucracy. "Sembène's approach is spare, laconic, slightly ironic, and never patronizing" (*The New York Times*). **MANDABI** is Sembène's first film shot in Wolof, the mother tongue of the majority of Senegalese. This choice encouraged other African filmmakers to work with local vernacular languages as distinct from French or other languages brought to Africa by former colonial rulers. **MANDABI** received the International Critics' Prize at the Venice Film Festival.

Saturday, February 23 8:45 p.m.

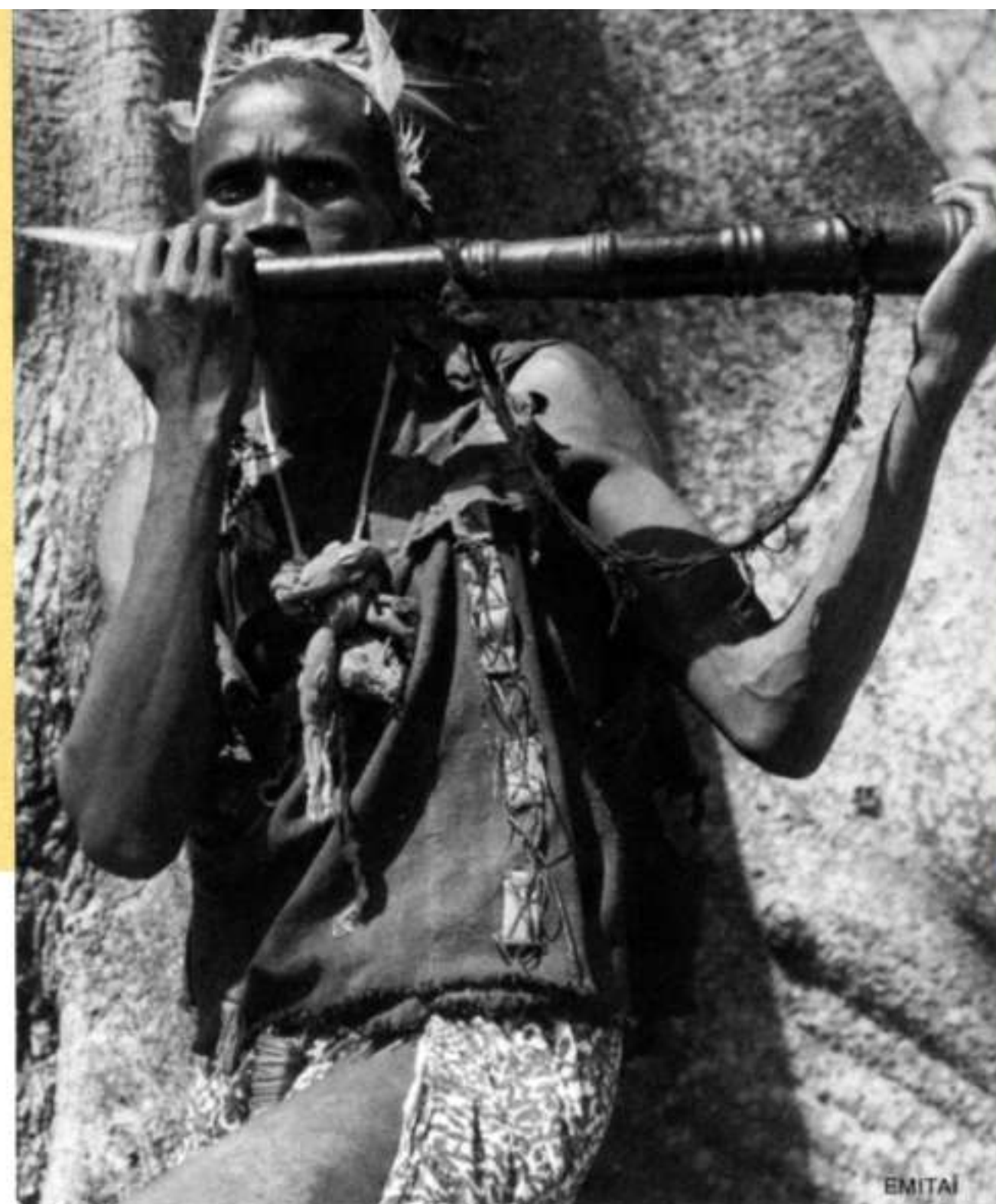
EMITAÏ (GOD OF THUNDER/LORD OF THE SKY)

Director: Ousmane Sembène

Senegal 1971 101 minutes • Cast: Robert Fontaine, Michel Renaudeau, Andoujo Diahou

Emitaï is the name for the Diola God of Thunder. A story about the awakening of national consciousness, EMITAÏ takes place towards the end of WWII in a village under French colonial rule. This is a tale of resistance among a tribe who guard their traditions and refuse to give up their sacred rice crop to the French authorities, who have imposed a rice tax of sixty pounds per inhabitant. "Rice is sacred to the Diolas, associated with their rituals and their gods, and to surrender it would imply that they were dishonoring or rejecting those gods. For an African, EMITAÏ is a direct challenge to deeply rooted beliefs, a challenge that makes no concessions to the expectations and desires of Western audiences" (Michael Popkin, *The Village Voice*). The film was shot in seven weeks in the Casamance region of southern Senegal with a supporting cast of non-professional actors drawn from local villages. "I dedicate this film to all militants of the African cause" (Ousmane Sembène).

Thursday, February 28 6:30 p.m.



EMITAÏ

GUELWAAR

Director: Ousmane Sembène

Senegal 1992 115 minutes • Cast: Omar Seck, Thierno Ndiaye

"A work of wry sophistication" (Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*), GUELWAAR has the makings of a political farce in the spirit of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's DEATH OF A BUREAUCRAT. The body of a murdered political activist suddenly goes missing from the morgue. The police discover that his corpse has accidentally been carried to a neighbouring village and given a Muslim burial (the dead man was Catholic). The attempts of his family to retrieve the body escalate into a holy war. But farce GUELWAAR most decidedly is not. Sembène transforms his simple narrative into a complex, stirring examination of the legacy of colonialism in Africa. "Exceptional, tremendously moving . . . such intelligence shines out of Sembène's films. . . . Sembène is a little like Noam Chomsky in that he consciously sets out to compile a kind of counter-history, a corrective to the official record" (Georgia Brown, *The Village Voice*).

Wednesday, March 6 8:45 p.m.



GUELWAAR

TORONTO PREMIERE! SEMBÈNE'S LATEST!

FAAT-KINE

Director: Ousmane Sembène • Senegal 2001 118 minutes • Cast: Venus Seye, Mame Ndumbé Diop

Warm and often funny, FAAT-KINE is a vibrant tribute to what Sembène calls the "everyday heroism of African women." Faat-Kine is a single mother who holds a job as the manager of a gasoline station, where she has worked her way up the ladder against considerable odds. Born in 1960, the year of Senegal's independence, Faat-Kine personifies aspects of Senegal's struggle for liberation. Her world revolves around her two college-age children, her own mother, her two ex-husbands, and her female friends. Sembène offers a realistic depiction of life in Senegal's capital city, where shantytowns stand beside modern apartment towers and social problems are prevalent, but it's still possible to make a good life for oneself. Sembène demonstrates that much of what holds contemporary African society together is the strength of its women. "FAAT-KINE marks a milestone in its director's relentless struggle to create restorative images of Africa and to promote a new film language" (Samba Gadjigo). "Sembène's most hopeful comedy" (Michael Atkinson, *The Village Voice*).

Friday, March 1 8:45 p.m.

CAMP DE THIAROYE (THE CAMP AT THIAROYE)

Directors: Ousmane Sembène & Thierno Faty Sow

Senegal/Tunisia 1988 152 minutes • Cast: Ibrahima Sane, Sijiri Bakaba, Gustave Sorgho, Jean-Daniel Simon.

A powerfully incisive classic based on historical fact, CAMP DE THIAROYE won a top prize at the Venice Film Festival. African troops returning to their native Senegal from Europe at the close of WWII are faced with racist attitudes as deep as those many had just experienced while imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. The French colonial authorities in Dakar place the returning soldiers in transit camps, ostensibly for a temporary period before discharge; however, it soon becomes clear that the rulers are trying to reestablish the supremacy they held over African citizens prior to the war. Tension escalates to rebellion. Skillfully rendered scenes of ruthlessness in CAMP DE THIAROYE have been compared with the Odessa Steps sequence in POTEMKIN. "This, in microcosm, is a story of colonialism, told from the receiving end and taken to a radical conclusion. Sembène and Sow have made what is not only a humane, passionate film, but an honest and vital memorial to those men who died, after the war, at Camp Thiaroye" (*Time Out*).

Saturday, March 2 8:30 p.m. (note early start time)



CAMP DE THIAROYE