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FAAT KINE

VHS and 35mm

110 minutes, 2001, Senegal

Director: Ousmane Sembene

in French and Wolof with English subtitles

ABOUT THE FILM

In **Faat Kine**, Ousmane Sembene, the unquestioned father of African cinema, calls his fellow Africans to a reckoning of the post-independence era at the beginning of a new century. At 77, he sums up 40 years of path-breaking filmmaking with a penetrating analysis of the interplay of gender, economics and power in today's Africa. Sembene accomplishes all this through the deceptively light domestic drama of **Faat Kine**, a gas station operator born, significantly, the same year as Senegalese independence, 1960.

Faat Kine is, from its first shot to its surprising last, Sembene's tribute to what he calls the "everyday heroism of African women." In the opening frame, a procession of traditionally dressed women wends its way majestically through the hectic heart of modern Dakar. **Faat Kine** lets them pass and drives on as she carries their story into the present. Sembene has said: "Africa's society and economy are held together today by women. But how can women have these responsibilities and yet be denied the same privileges as men?"

Although the film covers several days, it feels more like a single day in the life of **Faat Kine** - from learning of her children's successful exam results in the morning to their party that night. This apparently uneventful plot is interspersed with brief flashbacks, announced by music cues, as **Faat Kine** recalls the struggles that made this moment of quiet achievement possible. Sembene dares in this latest film to reduce narrative to a minimum because **Faat Kine** is not so much a drama of events, as a drama of recognition, a long-overdue accounting which in its last scenes turns into a virtual public trial of a generation of misleaders.

Throughout the film, it becomes clear that traditional roles, between males and females, parents and children, no longer apply and that it is time to start calling things by their real names. For example, Mammy describes herself as the "daughter" of her daughter, **Faat Kine**; Djib recalls he always thought of his mother as his sister and he denies that his absent father has any right to call him his son; **Faat Kine**'s father disinherits her and cripples her mother.

Faat Kine joins a number of recent African films which use abusive, patriarchal relationships to symbolize the more general despoiling of Africa by a corrupt and ineffective (male) elite. Sembene may have first suggested this equation when the disgusted wife at the end of *Borom Sarret* leaves to earn the dinner money, probably by prostitution. By the time of *Xala*, El Hadji clearly represents a neo-colonialism scorned by his wives and daughter. In Moussa Sene Absa's *Tableau Ferraille* Gagnesiri, the faithful, traditional wife sails away from Damm, her vacillating politician husband, representing

CRITICAL COMMENT

"Sembene's social realist tableaux are tempered by his empathy and a hushed intimacy suffuses his work...A heady mix of social comedy and melodrama."

Vibe

"A sunny, minimalist soap opera...Offers both an introduction and a postscript to Sembene's work."

Village Voice

"The welcome return of the master...He hasn't missed a step and we're lucky to have him back on his path."

New York Times

*"**Faat Kine** marks a milestone in its director's relentless struggle to create restorative images of Africa and to promote a new film language...A folktale masterfully oscillating between past, present and future."*

Samba Gadjigo, Mount Holyoke College

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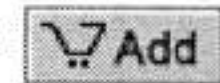
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grassroots Africa finally abandoning its often self-interested leaders to set its own course; one can even imagine her becoming the self-reliant businesswoman, Faat Kine.

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During the flashback sequences, we learn that Faat Kine has been betrayed by all the most important men in her life. M. Gaye, her high school teacher, seduces her and then abandons their daughter, Aby, and her. Later a petty conman Boubakar Oumar Payane steals her savings and abandons their son, Djib, and her. The one male who can see clearly through all the hypocrisy is Faat Kine's son Djib, described as a "lion," an avatar of a new Africa. In the end, it is left to him to prosecute the men in her life, symbolizing perhaps that the younger generation will redress the injustices of Faat Kine's. Many of the charges Djib hurls against the patriarchs were used by the opposition in the watershed Senegalese election of 2000 which ousted the post-independence regime for the first time. Djib is accused of being "un-African" because he refuses to show respect to his elders but he makes a crucial distinction by asking: whose Africa should he respect: the Africa of the corrupt patriarchs or of the hard-working common people like Faat Kine?

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Faat Kine, like her friends, the other businesswomen of Dakar, has been able to escape her feudal dependence on men through her participation in the market economy outside the state sector. Sembene, in a cameo appearance as a rustic visiting the city, expresses more amazement than disdain when he encounters these flamboyant, self-assured women. In a film permeated by commercial transactions, Faat Kine exemplifies a model of economic self-reliance tempered with charity; she frugally refuses to take bank loans at usurious rates or accept foreign currencies in clear contrast with African nations' growing indebtedness to Western banks and lending agencies.

Yet Faat Kine may have become so accustomed to relating to people through money her children fear she has cut herself off from deeper emotional attachments. In Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas*, for example, Linguère Ramatou, another businesswoman scorned by male society, retaliates by bribing a village to kill her dishonorable former lover in exchange for an international line of credit. Here, in contrast, Faat Kine decides to marry her male counterpart, Uncle Jean, a widower and businessman who has raised three children on his own.

This will finally be a marriage between equals as the unexpected last shot indicates. Held for a disquietingly long time, it shows only Faat Kine's feet curled in pleasure. In contrast, to pornography where the woman's body is fully exposed for the man's pleasure, here we see only Faat Kine's anticipated satisfaction. In fact, the audience could be seen as being placed in the unaccustomed position of the provider of that pleasure. This seems like an appropriate ending to a film which, after all, has been a tribute to women who for too long have had to do everything for themselves.

Find out more about Ousmane Sembene in [*Ousmane Sembene : The Life of a Revolutionary Artist*](#) by Samba Gadjigo

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