

Document Citation

Title	Continental shift
Author(s)	Mia Mask
Source	<i>Time Out New York</i>
Date	2001 Mar 29
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	83
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Sembène, Ousmane (1923), Ziguinchor-Casamance, Senegal
Film Subjects	Faat Kiné, Sembène, Ousmane, 2000

FILM

Interview

Continental shift

Master director Ousmane Sembene moves Africa beyond its outdated stereotypes **By Mia Mask**

America has a very negative image of Africa," says Senegalese filmmaker and novelist Ousmane Sembene. "That negativity is conveyed through images projected to America. The images are true; it's the commentaries accompanying the images that are dishonest." Sembene, widely regarded as the father of African cinema, has devoted his life to subverting foreigners' notions about his homeland by capturing its rich complexities—always keeping in mind how easily cultures can be misrepresented. "Everybody makes a film according to his or her own society," he says. "But when I watch American movies in Africa, the image I get of America is that it's a country of gangsters and killers."

Over the next few weeks, New Yorkers will have a chance to catch up with the director's work. Film Forum is currently playing Sembene's latest film, *Faat-Kine*, a contemporary study of family, tradition and women's emancipation from patriarchy in postindependence Senegal (which broke free from French rule in 1960). And for three weeks starting April 6, the theater will present "Sembene," a seven-film retrospective showcasing brand-new 35mm prints specially struck for the series by New Yorker Films. The woefully underscreened movies feature nonprofessional and professional actors and combine semi-documentary and fictional forms. Sembene's folkloric storytelling and lyrical cinematic style make his films more than just instruments of protest; they are stories about people in the process of

change and a culture reconciling the effects of colonial subjugation. (Sembene started as a writer. His early novels, 1956's *Le Docker Noir* and 1960's *God's Bits of Wood*, were notable for defying the Senegalese pattern of French assimilation, instead calling for liberation and social transformation.)

Since deciding to become a di-

women in high school think the film has been made recently," Sembene says.

Also included in the series is the comedy *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*, 1968), in which Sembene addresses social injustice with a force and incisiveness never before seen in African cinema by examining how a wealthy, educated elite exploits the illiterate poor. Central character Ibrahima Dieng (Makhouredia Gueye) lives peacefully in his village until a money order arrives from his nephew working in Paris. His struggle to have it cashed is marked by a series of misadventures and humiliation. *Mandabi* reveals Sembene's ability to create trenchant, social commentary with sharp humor. The director returns to skewering the rich with the faster-paced *Xala* (*The Curse*, 1974), a straightforward depiction of the buffoonish upper-class African heirs to the colonial power structure.

In *Faat-Kine*, the director tack-

lished feminist doctrine; they are a natural outgrowth of his view of the cosmos. "If you take the Bible or the Koran or whatever, you realize those are really the books of the faiths that have completely destroyed women—that have crushed women," he says. "Every human being who is intellectually honest knows that, in creation, the man is always inferior to the woman."

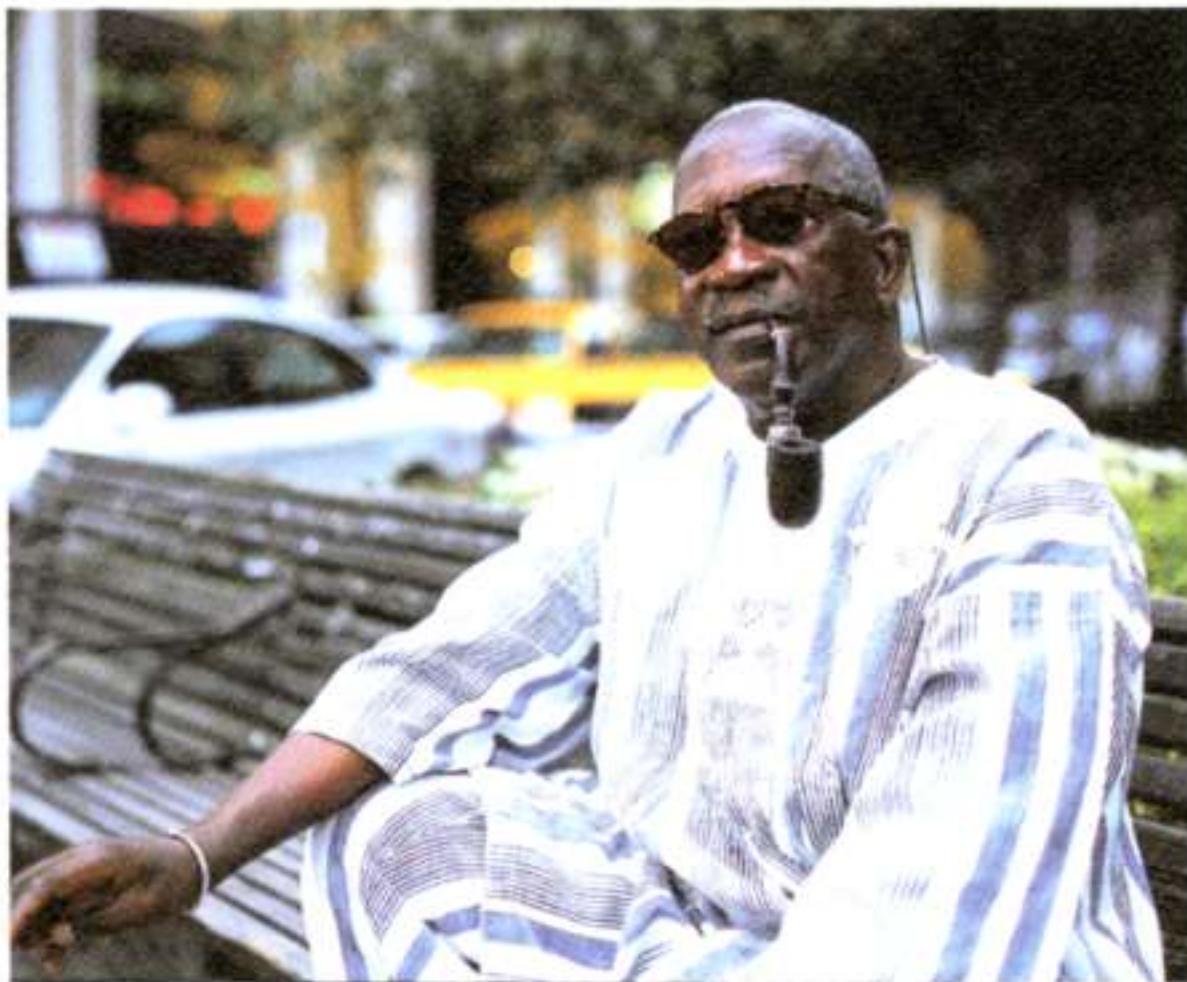
A related theme running through Sembene's films is impotence. Whether it's the temporary sexual problems faced by the main character in *Xala*, the political and social irrelevance of the petit bourgeoisie in *Mandabi* or the financial helplessness of men in *Faat-Kine*, impotence serves as a symbol for the densely woven contradictions of the postcolonial condition. "Yes, impotence is a metaphor," he says. "However, it's also used to show that African men are a step behind in the progress of their society. I always say it's not women but men who need to be liberated."

Because Sembene's films explore the connections between gender relations and national sovereignty, many group him with other filmmakers such as Brazilian Glauber Rocha (*Land in Anguish*) and Cuban Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (*Memories of Underdevelopment*) into the category of "third-world cinema"—a term he flatly rejects. "The label *third-world*

cinema really doesn't have any meaning," he says. "I'm not part of a third whatever you call it. I am part of world cinema. From my perspective, I'm at the center, and everybody else is at the margin. Those labels should be discarded."

Sembene continues to take a culturally specific situation and make it universal in his next film, which deals with female genital mutilation. "The new subject is even more difficult, more delicate," he says. "Now, the conundrum is how to address and research this topic. But once audiences have seen it, they go a step further than the film. Ultimately, every film has a life of its own. Films go on to have their own history."

***Faat-Kine* is now playing at Film Forum, where "Sembene" will also run April 6–26.**



PUFF DADDY Pipe-smoking Sembene, left, is the sire of African film; right, a shot from his *Ceddo* (1977).

rector in his late thirties and making a landmark in black African cinema, the social drama *La Noire de...* (*Black Girl*, 1966), the 70-year-old Sembene has been a major force on the international film scene. In *La Noire de...*, the director explores the mistreatment and social alienation of Diouana, a Senegalese woman who leaves Africa to work in Antilles as a maid. Removed from normal social intercourse and abused by her French employers (the film recalls slave auctions in its depiction of how the young girls are hired), Diouana grows increasingly depressed and withdrawn, losing her identity in the foreign environment. Visually poetic, with a calculatedly minimal mise-en-scène, *La Noire de...* has withstood the test of time. "When I show it today, 16-year-old

les women's rights, a recurring theme in his films. "Men have said: God created man first and then created woman," says Sembene. "But without women, life would be meaningless. Modern Africa—postcolonial Africa—has given less tribute to women than traditional Africa did. A man can only be great when accompanied by a woman. That's what we're trying to say through our work."

If women are the pillars of progress in Sembene's modern Senegal (a point *Faat-Kine* bluntly makes near its conclusion), then men are condemned for retarding Africa's development by adhering to traditional religious and patriarchal customs. In *Faat-Kine*, one polygamist even blames his financial troubles on his many wives and children. Yet Sembene doesn't attribute his themes to any estab-