

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, Ph.D.

GOD OF THUNDER / Emitaï (1971)

Ousmane Sembène

OVERVIEW

Auteur Senegalese Writer, producer, and director Ousmane Sembène was born on January 1, 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal. He died on June 9, 2007, in Dakar, Senegal. Sembène attended both a Quranic school and a French school until age thirteen. He then worked with his father, a fisherman, before moving to Dakar in 1938, where he did a number of odd jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the corps of Senegalese *Tirailleurs* (sharpshooters) and sent to France to fight in the Free French Forces. In 1944 and 1947, Sembène was involved in union strikes, respectively, in Senegal as a railroad worker, and in France as a dock worker and member of the Communist Party. Having dropped out of school early, Sembène had to teach himself to read and write properly. He went on to write several novels, some of which he adapted into films. Sembène's only film training was one year spent at the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, at the age of forty, under Soviet director Mark Donskoy. Sembène, who liked to refer himself as a griot, an African storyteller and historian, produced nine features: *Black Girl* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitaï* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1977), *Camp Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelwar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2001), *Molaadé* (2003).

Film In *Emitaï*, Sembène turns his attention to colonial France's conduct towards the Diola, a minority group in the Casamance area of Senegal, where the filmmaker was born and whose language is on the verge of disappearance. "Diola" is the term that designates both the people and their language (which is spoken in the film alongside French). *Emitaï* is Sembène's testimony on a real-life clash between French troops and Diola rice farmers that took place in Casamance during the last months of WW II. Beyond recounting what happens when France abducts young Diola men to fight in Europe and requisitions the local rice harvest to sustain its military, *Emitaï* is an exploration of such themes as religion, alienation, gender, colonial racism and colonial economy. *Emitaï* is a slow-paced film that seems to linger too long on the same scenes or repeat them superfluously. However, the film's message is powerfully provocative, as the reactions it generated throughout the world testify. *Emitaï* won the OCIC Award at the 1972 Forum of New Film, at the Berlin International Film Festival, and the Silver Prize at the 1972 Moscow International Film Festival.

Background *Emitaï* was shot on location, in the village of Dimbering, on and off for a period of seven weeks spreading over a whole year. In preparation, Sembène spent two years among the Diola learning their language. The English title of the film is a direct translation of the Diola expression "God of thunder." The cast for the film was composed of Diola villagers, who never acted before, and who were not alphabetically literate. The actors had no scripted dialogue, so they were free to be creative with their speech and interactions. However, Sembène had them rehearse each scene fifteen minutes before shooting to ensure that they had everything right. Sembène funded the filming of *Emitaï* with money he obtained from the Ecumenical Council of American Churches in Senegal for making a previous film, *Tauw* (1970). Coproduced by the Council, *Tauw* is critical of Islam's intrusion into all aspects of the Senegalese' lives, and the film invited criticisms of religious cooptation and crusading against Sembène. In his own defense, the filmmaker had this to say: "I take money from where I can get it, even from a church." The French conduct that *Emitaï* exposed was so upsetting to the French government that they managed to get *Emitaï* banned everywhere in Africa, even in Anglophone Africa, except Senegal, where its screening was only allowed after a year of protest. In Guadeloupe, the French ambassador maneuvered to block its showing. In Côte d'Ivoire, a committee of eight African and two French officials pre-screened the film. Although the Africans were all in favor of showing it, the French reported to their ambassador, who pressured the Ivorian government to have the film censored.

CHARACTERS

- Djimeko* The Diola chief, who accuses his ancestral gods of negligence
Commander A French commander, who forcibly recruits Diola for the French army
Lieutenant A French officer, who thinks that the Diola are all savages, and who orders their slaughter
Sergeant A Diola, who serves in the French army as a sergeant

SYNOPSIS

During the Second World War, as was the case for the First World War, France resorted to its African colonies to obtain supplies of men and food. In a Diola village, strong young men are kidnapped by African troops of the French colonial army and forcibly enlisted to fight in France. When the need for food for the troops in France becomes pressing, the colonial administration establishes a rice tax, which requires each Diola family to cede a significant portion of their rice harvest to the French army. Although they have extensive rice fields, the Diola are small consumers of this cereal, which they traditionally reserve for sacred ceremonies. Thus, these people, who lament seeing their village empty of their sons, are faced with another dilemma, that of giving the colonizer part of their sacred food. The women, who are the main workers on the fields, hide the harvest. The women are arrested by the colonial army, who vow not to let them go free unless they reveal where the rice is hidden. Exasperated by the silence of the gods in the face of the injustice and humiliation suffered by his people, Djimeko, the Diola chief, refuses to consult the gods any longer and launches his warriors against the French army. Djimeko's young warriors are exterminated and he himself is seriously injured. Before dying, Djimeko has a confrontation with the gods, who accuse him of impertinence, and whom he also accuses of selfishness and neglect towards the Diola. The gods condemn Djimeko to death, and Djimeko warns them that their reign is also coming to an end. Under the threat of the authorities to burn the village and the body of their leader and to imprison their women, the men give in and decide to take the rice harvest to the French officers. However, as the men hear the women in the distance celebrating the funeral of their fallen leader, the men unload their baskets of rice in the middle of the road, thus, angering the white officers, who order the black French troops to shoot and kill them.

SCENES

Abducted On their way home from a day's work, some young Diola rice farmers (a group in the rich agricultural region of Casamance, Senegal) are captured by black African troops of the French colonial army. They are rounded up in a nearby clearing. Two boys from the village watch the events, hidden from the soldiers' view.



The hostage In a nearby village, the soldiers have taken hostage the father of a young man who has escaped their capture. The soldiers tell the old man that he will not be released until his son gives himself up for conscription. The villagers watch the scene, frightened and powerless. Two women among the watchers leave the scene. They are the young man's sisters. They paddle a canoe into a secluded area in the mangroves, where they find the young man in hiding. He asks them if the soldiers have left the village yet. His sisters tell him that the soldiers are still there. The young man tells his sisters that the white man's war is not his people's war, and that he will not fight in it. The women tell the young man that his father has been detained by the soldiers until he gives himself up. The young man is distraught. He decides to give himself up. He comes to the village and unties his father. The soldiers take the young man away to join the other captured men. The father looks back sadly as his son leaves.



Pétain is your father A white commander comes to see the captured young Diola men. He asks a black soldier to translate to them what he has to say. He tells the abductees that they all are volunteers. He tells them that they will be sent to France to fight for Marshal Pétain, whose picture he shows them. He tells them that Pétain is the chief of France and the father of the French people and their father, too. The white commander tells the captured men that France is at war against



Germany, and it is a great honor that France gives them to fight by her side. He tells them that their fathers have shown courage during the first world war, and he hopes that they will also show courage today. He tells them that upon their return from the war, they will have great stories to tell their children and grandchildren, and he wishes them a good trip to France. The “recruits” are rounded up and trained. Soon they learn and march to the sound of patriotic songs praising France’s glory.

Djimeko will not wait for the gods’ counsel Armed with bows and arrows, the Diola prepare for an offensive against the colonial army. The elders decide to make offerings to the gods for their approval and protection. Djimeko, the village chief, takes issue with that. He asks his peers where the gods were when the whites raided their villages, kidnapped their sons, and humiliated them? A conflict erupts between those who still believe in the protection of the gods and those who doubt the gods’ benevolence. The village elders gather under a tree. They lament that the white man’s war has emptied their village, and that today, sons die before their fathers, which is a new thing. The elders wonder why their ancestral gods have remained silent about the injustice done to them by the whites. Djimeko tells the villagers to act now, for the soldiers are approaching. He tells his peers that giving up their rice to the white men would be an offense to their dignity, for rice is the fruit of the women’s sweat. Djimeko asks the warriors to follow him to battle. The warriors raise their weapons in unison and follow him. The Diola sentries sound the alarm on the approaching colonial soldiers. The Diola warriors launch the defense, but their arrows and spears are useless against the soldiers’ guns. Djimeko is gravely wounded and carried to the village.



Djimeko will speak to the gods From their hideout, the village elders make offerings to the gods and perform ritualistic dances. A priest summons the gods. The priest asks Djimeko to speak directly to the spectral figures.



Djimeko addresses the gods. He asks them why they accept that his people go through such a grim fate. He wants to know why the gods have been neglecting them and leaving the whites to rob them of their sacred rice and humiliate them in front of their wives. The gods reproach Djimeko for doubting them and refusing to make an offering to them. Djimeko tells the gods that his people have always respected their laws, and he asks the gods if they are more sacred than the people’s lives. Djimeko condemns the gods. The gods tell Djimeko that he has offended them. Djimeko wants to know one thing: should they let the whites take their rice? Djimeko’s questions offend the gods. They tell him that he no longer believes in them and must die. Djimeko says so be it, but adds that the gods will die with him. After saying these words, Djimeko falls back and dies.

Hiding the rice It has been one year since the young Diola men have been sent to France to fight. Life has resumed its daily routine for the Diola. They have learned to live without their vigorous young men. In the rice fields, the men weed and prepare the land. The women and girls enrich the soil with fertilizers, then plant, grow, and husk the rice. The colonial administration passes a rice tax demanding each family of farmers to surrender a large portion of their harvest to feed French soldiers in France.



A French army colonel orders his lieutenant to take two platoons into the countryside, requisition all the rice he can find there and bring it to Dakar. He orders him to crush any rebellion against that requisition. The colonel advises his lieutenant to take Badji, a black sergeant, who knows the customs, with him. Through a coded system of drumbeats, horns, and howling, the Diola warn one another of the soldiers’ coming. They elude the soldiers, and hide their harvests in places behind the intricate labyrinth of nearby mangroves.

The women are taken hostage The village is raided, but the soldiers look in vain for the village chief. The white commander orders his black soldiers to round up the women and bring them to him. The commander orders the women to sit in the sun. Another white officer comes with a local dignitary he has captured. He asks the black sergeant to translate to the villagers his order that they supply the army with 50 tons of rice. An uproar of indignation rises from the women. The white officer tells the dignitary that the women will be held hostage until the village provides its quota of rice. The dignitary is released and ordered to pass the message to the other men. One of the white officers suggests that since the chief will not cooperate, they should kill the chief and name one that likes France. The other one replies that it will not work, for the Diola will poison any chief they name. The white officers go sit in the shade, leaving the women in the sun. The drums announce that Djimeko is wounded. The women will not say where they keep the rice. One of the white officers suggests that they force them to talk. The other officer replies that the women will rather die than speak, for they have more consideration for the dead than the living. He adds that the rice they keep is not for their daily consumption. They use it during funerals. The children who witnessed the capture of the villagers bring woven sunshades for the women and food for the infants. The black sergeant snatches the sunshade from the women. One of the women gets up and wrestles it from him. The white officers look on, astounded at the woman's daring act.



Djimeko needs a chief's burial The elders lament that they cannot give Djimeko a dignified burial but an ordinary one not worthy of his rank. The gods, they say, are offended. Furthermore, funerals need women, and their women are the prisoners of the whites. Djimeko is taken to his burial site with the fervor of warrior chants and dances.



They're fighting for France, let France feed them The white officer hears the funeral chants and orders his soldiers to follow him in the direction of the chant. The soldiers surround the warriors. Hidden away, the two boys witness the event unfold. The black sergeant translates the white officer's words. The white officer tells the warriors that France sympathizes with their grief. However, unless they tell him where the rice is, there will be no burial for their chief. The officer tells the warriors that the rice they want is for feeding the warriors' children, who are fighting in France. The village priest tells the white officer that the village sons are fighting for France, not for the village, and must, therefore, be fed by France. The officer replies that he will burn the village and Djimeko's body, and he will imprison the women if they do not give him the rice. The officer sends the Diola men away to think about his proposition. The villagers leave Djimeko's body in the sun and withdraw. The officer orders two soldiers to keep watch over the body.

The gods will not appear The elders gather to discuss the dilemma. Some think that the gods have abandoned them because of Djimeko's insolence. Others think that Djimeko acted with courage when he took up arms against the oppressors. The elders decide to appease the gods with offerings. The heat and the long time sitting in the sun start to affect the women. The two boys bring the women some drinking water. A woman whispers something in one of the boys' ears. The black sergeant calls him a spy and chases him away. The women start to sing. The sergeant orders them to be quiet. They do not obey. The drums start to beat and the white officer asks the black sergeant to explain what is going on. The sergeant listens then explains that after sacrificing a goat, the elders have named a new chief. The elders appeal to the gods and tell them that giving away their rice would be a denial of their culture and tradition. They ask for the gods' counsel. The gods do not appear. The men must now decide on their own on whether to give the rice to the whites or let them burn their village and imprison their wives, which, as they put it, is like living in shame or dying.



Pétain is out, de Gaulle is in. The white officers receive some mail from a local messenger. They are not very pleased by what they learn. In France, Marshal Pétain is no longer the leader. De Gaulle is. For them, it means that they must remove all the Pétain posters and messages on the African huts and in public places and replace them with de Gaulle's. The white officer calls up the black sergeant and hands him the new posters. The black sergeant starts tearing down Pétain's posters and putting up de Gaulle's. The black soldiers gather around him and ask him who that person on the poster is. The sergeant tells them that it is the new French chief, a brigadier with two stars. They want to know how many stars Pétain has. He replies 7. The soldiers cannot believe that a two-star soldier can command a seven-star soldier. They think that everything is upside down in the French army.



The men start to give in Three men come to the village carrying baskets of rice. They tell the white officers that it is their families' share. The officers want to know if the other villagers are disposed to pay their share. The men say that they are paying for their families and cannot speak for the others. Their women are released, but the men are held hostage until they tell where the rice is kept. In protest, the wives refuse to leave without their husbands. The officers threaten to imprison both the two husbands and their wives if the wives will not leave.



The women perform Djimeko's and a boy's funerals One black soldier senses some movements in the bushes. He shoots in the direction. It creates a panic movement. The women get up and start running. One of the boys has been killed by a black soldier. The women take the boy to be buried. They each carry stalks of rice on their heads. The women walk to Djimeko's body and place the boy's body next to his. They perform the funeral rituals for both Djimeko and the boy.



The slaughter The men carry baskets of rice on their heads, escorted by the white officers and the black soldiers. On the way, the men unload their charges and refuse to continue. The officers order their soldiers to kneel and take aiming positions towards the men. The soldiers' guns remain pointed at the villagers for long, tense minutes. Then one of the officers orders the soldiers to fire. The aftermath is not shown.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DJIMEKO Djimeko, the Diola chief, is a rebellious, brave, and proud man. Rebellious against colonial injustice, he is also rebellious against the inaction and neglect of the ancestral gods. He launches his warriors against the superior colonial army. And when wounded, both physically and in his pride, and on the verge of dying, he fulminates against the Diola gods, whom he accuses of having allowed the humiliation of the Diola through their inattention, and he announces the imminent end of their egotistical reign over his people.

Rebellious Djimeko has always been respectful of the tribal gods to whom he has always made offerings. In return, he expects his gods to protect his people. However, the gods fail to react to the humiliation suffered by the Diola at the hands of the colonial administration. Djimeko decides that he can no longer pledge allegiance to negligent and selfish gods, who only receive offerings from the people without giving anything in return, who dodge their responsibilities and abandon the people to their tormentors. Djimeko repudiates the Diola gods.

Brave Despite the technological superiority of the colonial army, whose soldiers have guns, Djimeko launches his troops against them. His peers recognize Djimeko as a courageous soldier and want to give him a fitting funeral. Moreover, Djimeko is the only person among the Diola who dares to criticize the gods. He tells them that they have failed in their mission. He warns them that their abusive reign is coming to an end.

Proud A phrase of Djimeko's that his peers retain after his death is that man dies or lives with a weapon in his hand. With these words, Djimeko insinuated that a man must refuse to be humiliated, and that when humiliation knocks at his door, a man must prevent it by a proud force of arms. Djimeko applied his own principles when the colonial army tried to humiliate his people. He defended his honor by waging war against the colonizers, and died as a result.

THE BLACK SERGEANT The black sergeant is an alienated and seduced character. He longs to be accepted into the world of his white superiors. To achieve this, he crushes and oppresses his people. But the white world sees him only as an accessory, a disposable agent in the accomplishment of its imperialist mission. Rejected by the white world and isolated from the black world, he belongs to neither.

Alienated The black sergeant is an alienated individual, running away from his people. An agent of the colonial army, he intends to mark the difference between himself and his Diola relatives by his severity. If he had his way, he would deny the assembled women sunshades, food, and water. His wish is to be less assimilated into his people, the Diola, and more adopted by the colonial system. His dream is to one day wear the distinctive hat of his superiors and earn his stripes in the French army, too. But he will never fulfill this dream, which is reserved for whites.

Seduced The black sergeant is seduced by Western civilization, and French civilization in particular. The look he casts at his fellow tribesmen is one of contempt, while the look he casts at his white superiors is one of envy and admiration. He is seduced by their ranks, their origins, their language, which he proudly translates to his people. On his gradation scale, France and the French are superior, while Senegal and the Senegalese are inferior.

THE WHITE SOLDIERS The white officers are a reflection of France. Through them, Sembène presents a nuanced image of France and the French. They can be racist and paternalistic, but they can also show empathy, albeit measured, towards Africans. While one of them wants to get rid of the Diola by slaughtering them, the other praises their courage, like a slave master would proudly praise his slaves after a great harvest, with condescension.

Paternalistic/empathetic The first lieutenant, to whom the newly abducted Diola are presented for enrolment in the French army, uses language that, while empathetic, is nonetheless condescending. He tells them that they are all volunteers and thanks them, even though he knows full well that they have been kidnapped. He tells them that when they come back from the war, they will have great stories to tell their children and grandchildren, as if going to war were a walk in the park. And he tells them they should be proud of the honor France has bestowed on them by allowing them to defend her, as if these Diola kidnapped from their families had rushed to the doors of French recruiters, pleading to join the French army.

Racist The second white lieutenant arrived in Senegal with a negative perception of the Senegalese. He is convinced they are savages. He asks his colleague to torture the women to make them confess where they are hiding the rice. When he overhears two Diola soldiers talking about de Gaulle as their leader, he immediately steps in to correct them. De Gaulle, he insists, is the leader of France, not of Senegal. The racist officer would not want blacks to imagine they shared an ancestry with him. For him, the world of the French and that of the Africans are two distinct and irreconcilable worlds. At the end of the film, he fulfills a long-held wish to slaughter the Diola.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Religion The religious question Sembène raises in *Emitaï* is that of a people's loyalty to their gods, who seem deaf to their prayers. The Diola people practice a polytheistic animist religion. As the film's title ('God of Thunder') indicates, each natural phenomenon has its own god. To remain in the good graces of the

gods, the Diola make offerings to them. In the film, these offerings consist of chicken or goat sacrifices. Although the Diola are very attentive to pleasing their gods, the latter do not show up when their devotees call out for help. The young men of the village are continually kidnapped by the colonial army and sent to fight for France. The men are humiliated in front of their wives and children. The village empties itself of its vigorous arms and withers. Despite all this, the gods remain impassive. Now, it is the rice, the sacred food used to honor the dead during funerals, that is threatened with seizure by the colonizers. In order to meet the needs of its army at war, France imposed a tax on rice, requiring every Diola family to provide a large quantity of its harvest. Refusing to comply, the women, who were the main rice growers, hid the harvest in the mangroves. When the colonial army is deployed on a punitive mission, the men meet in conclave to decide what measures to take. Some of them propose that the gods be consulted and offerings made to them. Djimeko, the tribe's valiant warrior and chief, urges his peers to act immediately, wasting no time in offerings and prayers to gods who have abandoned them. While some clan members insist that they must wait for the gods' answer and accuse Djimeko of blasphemy, Djimeko rallies the clan warriors and launches an attack against the colonial army. The arrows of Djimeko's warriors are useless against the guns of the colonial army, and Djimeko's troops are exterminated and he himself seriously wounded. Before dying of his wounds, Djimeko has a tense exchange with the gods, who accuse him of having doubted them. Djimeko tells them that they are selfish, that they would rather be worshipped than think of protecting their people, that they have put their own lives above those of their people. The gods condemn Djimeko to death for his impertinence. Djimeko accepts his death and retorts that, with his death, they have just signaled their own. For Djimeko, God is what functions, and there is no reason to continue idolizing a god who does not function, that is, who does not satisfy the expectations of those who pray to him.

Gender In *Emitai*, Sembène reveals the assertiveness and resilience of women and the important role they play in Diola society as the backbone of the community and the carriers of culture. The social economy of the Diola is largely based on the work of women. After the men have turned the land, it is mainly the women and young girls who enrich it with fertilizer, who sow the rice, who protect it from predators, harvest it, hull it, and store it. The women are also the ones responsible for funeral ceremonies in which rice plays a primordial and sacred role. When the colonial army decides to seize the Diolas' rice harvest, the women are the first to hide it in the mangroves. To punish them, the colonial troops gather the women in the sun on a large square, from where they will only leave if they reveal the hiding place of the rice. While men deliberate whether they should submit to the law of the colonial authorities, wait for an intervention from the gods, or go straight to confrontation against the colonial army, and while the position of men remains uncertain, that of women is inflexible. They would rather suffer reprisals from the army, whatever they may be, than give in to blackmail and humiliation. For the men, however, being humiliated in front of their wives is unbearable and makes them seriously consider surrendering to the colonial administration's demands. The only thing that prevented them from buckling earlier is that giving the rice to the French would be a denial of their beliefs and a greater humiliation before their wives. The men consult their gods and make offerings to them. When the gods remain silent, they decide that they have exhausted all means and will give away their rice. However, they will not agree to live with shame. The men carry the rice to the French army. Halfway, however, in a last act of defiance, they drop their loads and will not go farther. The racist lieutenant orders his troops to execute them all. The women had successfully buried Djimeko and one of the boys of the clan. During that ceremony, the women allowed a boy to carry a gun and dance the sacred dance in honor of the chief, preparing him for a future role as a clan leader. One can only surmise that the women will, once again, carry out the duty of burying their husbands. As the women were sitting in the sun under the watch of the colonial army, they had in their arms some infants that they were breastfeeding. The men are dead, executed by the French army, or sent by force to war. However, the Diola, this minority tribe in Senegal, is far from disappearing. Their resilient women, the carriers of their culture, will not fail in their task of ensuring its continuance. Here, Sembène underlines the primordial role of women in carrying on tradition.

Colonial economy Sembène raises the important question of the colonial economy, a question which angers Western chancelleries, and which is one of the reasons, the revelation of colonial violence being the first, which led to the censorship against *Emitai* in many countries. *Emitai* shows that without the exploitation of Africa, France would be classified in the category of Third World countries because a country that does not have the resources to feed its people is a country in decline. And to feed and make its people work, both during its moments of crisis and during its moments of peace, France has always known how to

twist the arm of Africa. In *Emitaï*, the peasants are forced to cede the fruits of their hard work to France. In very enlightening scenes, Sembène, who worked around the rice harvest season for shooting this film, shows all the grueling work required for the production of rice by the Diola, from the preparation of the soil to the sowing and protecting fields from birds, from the harvest and the hulling to the transportation and storage in the granaries. Such work requires, strictly speaking, that the owners be relieved of it, if they so desire—which is not even the case with the Diola for whom rice is sacred—through fair remuneration or exchange. However, what is happening here is that France wants to appropriate the fruit of the work of others, of the Africans, by snatching it by force. This is exploitation, theft, pillage. Here, the “battle for rice” is only a synecdoche of a monumental pillaging of Africa by France which lasts for centuries. Since the 1800s, France was able to sustain itself through a colonial economy of exploitation and plunder of Africa. This is what former French President Chirac revealed during an interview, in an extraordinary moment of sincerity, which does not happen often: “...a large part of the money that is in our wallet comes precisely from the exploitation, for centuries, of Africa. Not all of it. But a lot comes from the exploitation of Africa.”

Social organization Sembène explains in an interview that among the Diola, the management of power is done through the vote of a leader who can be chosen from all strata of society. In *Emitaï*, we can see this democratic management of power at play. Indeed, no important decision comes from any authoritarian leader. When the villagers are faced with the great dilemma of whether or not to surrender their sacred rice to the colonial administration, it is in council that the men meet to discuss it. The decision of the men to wait for the intercession of the gods does not meet with the approval of chief Djimeko, who launches his warriors against the colonial army and suffers heavy losses. When Djimeko is carried to the village, injured, and addresses the gods with his last energies, it is as a man who speaks in a democratic assembly. The gods are not entities detached from the lives of men, fathers whose words cannot be questioned. These are men among men to whom Djimeko addresses, whose precepts he questions, and from whom he freely frees himself. Speaking as equals with one’s gods is what is taking place here. Is there any greater proof of democracy than this, especially for an Africa too often treated as the locus of disorder and autocracy?

Racism After being kidnapped by the French army’s black troops, the young Diola men are herded onto a parade ground, where they listen to a speech by the French commander. The commander congratulates them on volunteering to serve their homeland, France. He tells them they should feel honored by the opportunity France has given them to demonstrate their value and attachment to France. He tells them that they should prove themselves worthy of their fathers, who before them demonstrated their courage on the battlefields of the First World War. Indeed, the notion of the black soldier’s extraordinary courage on the battlefield, which was attached to the fathers of these kidnapped young people, and which the commander now expects of them, has a history that is fraught with racism. During the First European War, French war engineers were convinced that Blacks had warlike predispositions that could serve the French army in its fight against Germany. In fact, they were convinced that particular tribes had particular innate aggressive abilities. It was hoped that thanks to their “natural warlike abilities” the black soldiers, with the technical support of their French counterparts, would be formidable fighters against the Germans. Actually, French war engineers were so convinced that warlike abilities were innate to particular tribes that they recommended recruiting in specific tribal proportions. Senegal was the field of predilection of the racist recruiters, thus the term *Senegalese tirailleurs* (sharpshooters) (which will later be used to characterize any troops from French colonies). In fact, to frighten their enemies (the Germans) into fleeing the battleground, French newspapers depicted the *tirailleurs* as cannibalistic, beastly creatures, half-men half-animals, charging at the German soldiers with extraordinary savagery. Some French cartoons portrayed African soldiers as savages and barbarians wearing necklaces made of German soldiers’ ears. Likewise, German propaganda papers accused France of introducing black soldiers into a white war, thus sullyng a civilized white war fought on white soil with black, dark, bestial blood. From those for whom they fought, as well as from those against whom they fought, black soldiers suffered racism; they were beasts that could be disposed of without having to account to anyone. In *Emitaï*, the newly arrived white lieutenant, who, ever since he was assigned to the Diola region, has been dying to torture the Diola women to have them say where they hid the rice, who dreamed of going on a rampage against the Diola, and who asked his colleague if they could not just kill all the Diola and get over with it, finally finds satisfaction. At the end of the film, in a horrific scene that the French authorities cut for screenings in France, he gives the order to open fire on harmless peasants lined up along a dirt road.

Change The Second World War brought important changes for the protagonists. For the French, it was first of all that a conquering Germany imposed an administration on them through the Vichy government, a pro-German government, led by a straw man, Marshal Pétain. It is this Marshal, whose portraits haunt the walls of African huts, who requires that African troops be formed by forceful recruitment. When in June 1944, de Gaulle became head of the provisional government of the French Republic, France was in a way free, but not the Diola. The portraits of Pétain were removed and replaced by those of de Gaulle. However, African policy toward its colonies remained the same. The Diola continued to be recruited by force, the persecutions against them never ended, their rice supplies continued to be requisitioned, their women humiliated, and their villages burned. Indeed, what Sembène demonstrates is that Africa drives the pace of life in France by providing it with human, mineral and agricultural resources, and that fundamentally the situation in Africa does not improve. On the contrary, it is going from bad to worse because Africa is shrinking economically and morally to accommodate the West. In the relationship between Africa and France, Africa's change is regressive while France's is progressive, thanks to Africa.

Tradition The Diola of Senegal are a population of about 400,000 people. They are wet-rice farmers, whose daily lives are governed by animist gods. They live in democratic societies, where the chief of the tribe is selected by vote. In Diola society, the chief's voice is just one among many others, and his authority is not absolute but can be challenged anytime. In an interview, Sembène reveals that some chiefs have been elected in the morning only to be voted out in the evening by the people. The democratic governance of the Diola does not limit itself to the political or social sphere. It carries over to the religious sphere, too. In Diola religion, the gods, like the chiefs, are not inaccessible entities from whose words unquestionable precepts descend to the people. The gods are directly accessible by the people, and their authority is contestable. In *Emitai*, Djimeko contests the gods' authority by refusing to wait for their counsel before going to war against the colonial army. Djimeko resents what he sees as the gods' narcissistic behavior. He confronts them and accuses them of dereliction of duty and egotism. In retaliation, the gods condemn Djimeko to death. Why condemn to death someone who is obviously on the verge of death due to the extent of his injuries? Quite simply, the gods' condemnation closes the door of Diola leadership to Djimeko. This condemnation deprives him of the possibility of becoming a god and advisor to the people in the afterlife, as is the case among the Diola, where the worthy dead become gods in their turn. Thus, Djimeko's spirit will not be reincarnated as that of a god, at least not for the time being. For, as some ethnologists have noted, the redemption of a wandering soul is always possible in the Diola religion. All this tradition is still carried on by a conclave of the gods, a democratic approach.

Politics of selfishness The Diola society is spiritually governed by animist gods. The head god is *Emitai* (the god of thunder). *Emitai* delegates some of his duties to secondary gods, who are in charge of solving daily problems. In recognition for their service, or even in demand of these services, the Diola people make offerings to these secondary gods, in the form of animal sacrifices performed at shrines erected for these secondary gods. In the film, faced with the danger of dispossession and annihilation, the Diola make offerings to their secondary gods and invoke them. The gods remain silent and leave the people puzzled, who think that they have not done enough offerings, and therefore, give more to the gods. The people upgrade their offerings from chickens to goats. Still, the gods remain silent, until the village chief rebels and distances himself from the gods' authority. Here, Sembène offers a veiled denunciation of the politics of selfishness, which is rampant not only on the side of the colonizers but also on the side of the colonized. This selfishness is most apparent in France's colonial management, which simply siphons off the geological, agricultural and human riches of its colonies without giving anything significant in return. Diola young men are forcibly conscripted to defend France from Nazi occupation. Diola farmers are ransomed to feed the French army and general populations in times of crisis, and the Diola's protests are crushed in violence and bloodshed. However, Sembène's criticism is also directed at the Diola society, where those who govern it, the gods, are only concerned with their own well-being and pay no attention to the well-being of the people. The film is set in World War II, before the African independences. However, it was shot in 1971, eleven years after Senegal's independence. And in this post-independence Africa, Sembène sees the selfishness of African rulers, who are worshipped through the cult of personality, receive bribes and the meagre fruits of the people's hard labor, but do nothing to satisfy the latter's expectations. Here, Sembène shows that Africa's depressive condition is the result of both exogenous and endogenous causes, selfishness being one of these causes.

PSYCHOLOGY

Alienation With the changes brought to the Diola society by colonization, also come the alienation and estrangement of people from their ancestral values. It is remarkable to see how quickly young Africans are transformed from protectors of their people to executioners of their people by the colonial system. First revolted by colonial abuses and refusing to be regimented, the young Diola are soon coopted by France. Indeed, kidnapped by colonial troops, trained in boot camps to march in step and to follow orders and dressed in khaki uniforms and red hats and equipped with guns, these young Diola find themselves singing with enthusiasm and pride the glory of France and being the most faithful and docile collaborators of the colonial system. Soon, they were used by the colonial system to increase its numbers by kidnapping other Africans. They, thus, became the most formidable tormentors of their fellow Africans. The black sergeant is an impressive example of the neurotic African running away from himself. Outfitted with the same trousers and service cap as his superiors (the ordinary African troops wear khaki shorts and red bonnets), the black sergeant now sees himself as one of the whites, although the treatment he receives from his two white superiors is far from consideration and reciprocity. He is an exploited person who does not understand that he is exploited, and who, for the little attention given to him by the white officers, hates his tribesmen to the point of wanting to distance himself from them as much as possible by subjugating them. His performance is burlesque and pathetic. He never walks when his superiors call him: he runs and he jumps. And when they give him orders, he shouts them with great gestures to his black subordinates. His zeal is superfluous. He snatches the sunshade from one of the gathered women, who is trying to protect herself from the scorching sun. And it is another woman, exasperated by his excess of zeal, who comes to snatch from his hands the parasol that he has so impudently taken. The black sergeant is the prototype of the black colonized whom the colonizer filled with white dreams, and who now despises his origins. The settler's intrusion into the Diolas' lives also alienates them from their ancestral beliefs. When the gods of the Diola do not seem to find immediate answers to the danger that threatens them and seem to remain deaf to the humiliation the Diola suffer from the white colonizers, doubt sets in, and some, like Djimeko, deny their beliefs.

Loss Sembène addresses the theme of loss from several angles. First there is the loss of the identity of the Diola subject to colonial authority. The kidnapped young Diola, through their absence, weaken the village, which loses its strong arms. This village, once so lively, is becoming, as the elders lament, a ghost village, which is losing its soul. For these young Diola kidnapped by the colonial army, the loss of identity is more tragic when, dressed in khaki uniforms and equipped with guns, they turn against their people and become their executioners. These young people no longer recognize themselves as being from these African tribes, but rather as being part of France. However, to ridicule this notion of assimilation, Sembène caricatures the African soldiers of the French army as puppets, repeaters of orders, simple collaborators and executioners, never taken seriously by France. For the Diola men, the intrusion of France into their lives and the humiliations that follow mark the loss of their authority and their honor. The religious ceremonies that they are supposed to celebrate are, by necessity, officiated by the women alone. And it is they who now carry the baskets of rice on their heads while the women officiate the funerals. With this reversal of roles, this loss of men's identity, they prefer to die rather than live it in shame. In an orchestrated gesture of revolt whose consequence they seem to gladly invite, they refuse to carry their loads of rice to the French camp, and they line up, offering their chests to the colonial troops' bullets.

Rebellion/Defiance The Diola revolt against the French colonial administration came about because the people were tired of being subjected to the assaults of the French government, which, thousands of kilometers away, was trampling the rights of Africans. Sembène's criticism of that abuse is valid not only when these acts are exogenous (France exploiting its colonial empires), but also when they are endogenous (the exploitation of the Diola people by its alienated sons and gods). As a good unionist, Sembène suggests that when a government levies abusive taxes on its people, or when the royalties and contributions paid by the people to its representatives do not accrue to the people in terms of social benefits, it is within the people's right to rebel. For the Diola, the taxes imposed on them by the colonial administration are unjust and illegal. The Diola priest tells this to the French lieutenant, who tries to justify the rice tax as a necessary contribution to feed the Diola soldiers fighting in France. The priest replies that these young Diola are fighting for the liberation of France and should therefore be taken care of by France. Having run out of valid arguments, the lieutenant threatens to burn the Diola village and Djimeko's body along with it.

In the same way that the Diola refuse to pay illegal taxes to the French colonial system, Djimeko considers that the offerings made to the gods who govern them no longer have any reason to exist, insofar as the returns expected from making these offerings do not materialize. For Djimeko, then, these are abusive burdens imposed on the people by the gods. The revolt, the refusal to pay, is justified. Sembène's criticism is simple: no government, whatever its nature, has the right to impose undue burdens on its people. If it does, the people have every right to rebel.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the symbolism in the lone boy dancing at the funerals in the company of the women?
2. Do you think that the role reversal in the film (men carrying rice on their heads and women burying the dead) is permanent or temporary? Explain your answer.
3. Did the men know that their last act of defiance would cost them their lives? If so, why did they choose to do it?
4. In his treatment of characters, Sembène is careful not to paint the races (blacks and whites) in a single brushstroke. Instead, he shows how behaviors are individual-based rather than race-based. Describe two instances of Sembène's avoidance of generalization in *Emitai*.
5. Knowing that *Emitai* was based on true events, how does it affect your perception of women in Africa?