

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Martial Frindéthié, PhD

THE COURT / Bamako (1994)

Abderrahmane Sissako (1961-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Abderrahmane Sissako is a Malian-Mauritanian film director and producer. His father is from Mali and his mother from Mauritania. Sissako was born in 1961 in Kiffa, Mauritania, and grew up in Mali, where he completed his primary and secondary education. Sissako returned to Mauritania at age 19, and, thanks to a study grant, flew to the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography of Moscow to study film between 1983 and 1989. Sissako has been living in France since the early 1990s. He is married to Ethiopian filmmaker Maji-da Abdi. Sissako has produced a handful of shorts and documentaries, and a number of feature films, including *Life on Earth* (1998), *Waiting for Happiness* (2002), *Abouna* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), *Timbuktu* (2014), which garnered a dozen awards, and *Black Tea* (2024). In 2023, along with fifty other activists from around the world, Sissako signed a letter calling for an end to hostilities in the war between Israeli forces and Hamas and for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

Film *Bamako* is a mock trial of the international financial institutions, primarily the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, regarded by most Africans as the usurers and bleeders of Africa. The film features several parallel stories, but they all converge towards a critique of the financial institutions' recipe of liberalization for Africa and its devastating lasting effects on Africa's economies and social organizations.

Background written and produced by Sissako and co-produced by American filmmaker and producer Danny Glover, *Bamako* is a 115-minute docudrama shot in the filmmaker's childhood courtyard in the Malian capital city of Bamako. The languages used in the film are French and Bambara (the national language of Mali). In this two-million-Euro film putting the international financial institutions on trial, Sissako features professional judges and lawyers and real-life activists. *Bamako* received many accolades, including the Audience Award at the 2006 Paris cinema, the FACE Award at the 2007 Istanbul International Film Festival, and the Prix Lumiere for the Best French-Language Film.

CHARACTERS

Melé A young Malian woman who sings in cabarets at night to support her family
Chaka Melé's husband, a railway worker who lost his job with the privatization
Defense lawyer A European lawyer who represents the World Bank and IMF

SYNOPSIS

In a communal courtyard in the Malian capital of Bamako, transformed for the occasion into an international tribunal, the mock trial of the international financial institutions, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is taking place. Malian witnesses from civil society, the peasantry, the youth and general populace parade before the tribunal, where defense lawyers and plaintiffs' lawyers clash, to explain how the Structural Adjustment policy imposed on Mali by the World Bank and the Fund has had a direct impact on them. The courtroom is the home of a Malian couple, Chaka, a railway worker laid off by the Malian Railroads Company when the state-owned company was forced by financial institutions to sell its assets to foreign private investors, and Melé, his wife, who sings in bars in the evening to support the family. Chaka and Melé's relationship is on cold ice and shows no sign of improving; Chaka watches his wife come and go without really speaking to her. Chaka is learning Hebrew, in the hope that the much-trumpeted globalization will bring an Israeli embassy to Mali, which will employ him as a security guard. In the meantime, Chaka, like other Malians, sets his sights on a Pentecostal preacher who promises immediate solutions for the people of Mali. A movie-within-the movie, entitled *Death in Timbuktu*, is shown on television. It shows trigger-happy cowboys storming the town of Timbuktu, indiscriminately shooting at the

population, while Malian children watching the film on their televisions laugh and applaud the cowboys. Fortunately, a lone ranger, played by American actor Danny Glover, confronts the bad guys and liberates the town. *Bamako* ends when, his dreams shattered, Chaka commits suicide.

SCENES

Bamako awakens The city of Bamako (the Malian capital) awakens to the first sounds of dawn: the cadence of footsteps on the streets, the pounding of construction workers' hammers, the distant whistle of a train.



A tribunal in a courtyard In a courtyard that Chaka and his wife Melé share with other families, an international tribunal has been set up. Judges and lawyers are already in their seats, in front of piles of files. The first witnesses begin to arrive.



Life goes on The inhabitants of the courtyard go about their daily business, indifferent to this court set up in their space. A woman passes by, her child in her arms, while another woman does her laundry. Melé, preparing to go sing at a cabaret, has her dress adjusted by a man.



Wait for your turn An old man appears before the judges. Through the interpreter, they order him to remove his cap before declaring his identity. The man complies. The judges inform him that it is not yet his turn to give his testimony, and ask him to wait until he is called. The old man insists that he wants to speak right away because words eat away at the heart when repressed. The interpreter asks him to be patient and wait until he is called. The old man reluctantly agrees to wait and promises that his words will not remain within him.



Misplaced budgetary priorities A prosecution lawyer takes the floor to compare the shares of the budget of African states allocated, respectively, to social services and debt repayment to financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International World Fund between 1992 and 1997. While the prosecution is making its case, the camera pans to women on water chores. The prosecutor gives the example of a number of African countries that have devoted a disproportionate share of their budgets to paying off their debts rather than to social benefits: Kenya, 12.6% devoted to health, education and infrastructure versus 40% to debt repayment. For Zambia, it's 6.7% versus 40%, and for Cameroon, it's 4% versus 36%.



Africa needs an Africa-oriented development The lawyer calls an activist, Mrs. Traoré, as a witness and asks her what she thinks of these statistics. The witness replies that they are symptoms of an oppressive Western financial system that dictates that Africa must pay or die. Mrs. Traoré, an activist from Mali, adds that it was a mistake for Africa to squander its resources by following the West in an economic system that was bad for Africa. She says that Africa should rethink its development from an organic standpoint



Debt forgiveness is a deception Rappaport, a Western lawyer takes the floor and points out to the activist, Mrs. Traoré that her fine words are sweet to hear, but in no way constitute a program. He asks her if she knows that Europe has forgiven Mali 60% of its debt. Mrs. Traoré replies that debt forgiveness it is a deception on the part of the G8 to enhance its image. She says that, given the exorbitant interest rates applied to loans, Africa has already paid off its debt and no longer owes anything to the international financial institutions.



Africa must not be mere provider of raw materials

Rappaport asks Mrs. Traoré how she would govern Mali. Mrs. Traoré insists that her role is not to propose a governing agenda, but to inform Africans and make them aware of the peril that Africa is facing. The defense lawyer asks her why then she speaks as if she were an expert. The witness replies that to better inform and raise awareness, she must have expertise in the subject even though she is not a government official. Mrs. Traoré explains that Africa has confined itself to the role of exporter of raw materials to Europe. This model, she says, is not helpful to Africa. She explains that the economic rise of China, which is giving Europe cause to worry, must serve as an example to Africans.



AToddler While Mrs. Traoré is making her plea, a toddler, dressed in a jersey with a misspelt label in English ["Heppiness U"] is having fun ripping pages out of the trial files. The toddler wears shoes that light up and squeak with every step he takes.



Globalization? Rappaport asks Mrs. Traoré whether she believes that African development is still possible within the politics of globalization, if standards such as those set by the WTO can be accepted by everyone. He goes on to ask her whether she believes that Africa has absolutely nothing to gain in the open world of globalization. Mrs. Traoré rejoins that the world of globalization is not an open world. She accuses globalization of decivilizing, of dehumanizing Africans. She illustrates her argument by citing the examples of African migrants mistreated in Europe before being sent back to their respective countries.

Africa stands on its feet thanks to its women A young man presents himself at the courthouse gate. He is Madou Keïta. He claims to be a witness. The doorman cannot find his name on the list and denies him entry. From outside, listening to the proceeding, the young man hears Mrs. Traoré claim that if Africa has not yet imploded, it is thanks to African women. The women interrupt their work to listen to Mrs. Traoré.



Counterfeit eyeglasses The court is adjourned. A seller of counterfeit eyeglasses offers his wares to the audience. Mr. Rappaport tries on some contraband sunglasses and looks at himself in the mirror to see if they fit. The salesman assures Rappaport that his glasses are Gucci, but Rappaport insists on seeing the Gucci logo. The salesman asks him to trust him. Their discussion is drowned out by the Muezzin's call to prayer.



Emigration to Europe The court resumes with the call for witnesses. A witness invites himself without being summoned. He is an unsuccessful candidate for emigration to Europe, who was repatriated from Morocco. He wants to tell his story. The judges ask him to wait to be summoned. Finally admitted to the court, Madou Keïta recounts his attempt to reach Europe via Niger and Algeria. He explains that the Algerian soldiers opened fire on the group of migrants he was part of to prevent them from crossing the Algerian border. He explains how some migrants, unable to continue, resign themselves to death in the desert. His explanations visibly move the audience.



Has your government ever done anything for you? A Malian defense lawyer asks Madou Keïta if he ever went to school. He asks Madou if the government has ever provided him with health coverage or trained him in a profession. Madou replies that he has never received any of these things from his government.



You're defending the wrong cause A woman in the audience attacks the Malian lawyer for wanting to absolve Europe by placing the tragedy of Madou and the migrants exclusively in the hands of the Malian government. She reminds the lawyer that he will never be like those he defends. The judge suspends the proceedings. The woman has a blood pressure emergency and is attended by a nurse in the audience.



TV SHOW

Death in Timbuktu As night falls, a neighbor takes his TV out into the yard for all to enjoy. After the news, the newsreader says goodbye to the viewers and announces a new program. However, technical problems force her to stay on screen for long minutes. In his room, Chaka is learning Hebrew. A Western film is shown on television. The title is *Death in Timbuktu*. Cowboys on horseback enter the Malian town of Timbuktu. A lone cowboy with a loaded rifle is waiting for them, hidden on the rooftops.



They don't need two teachers The cowboys line up schoolchildren and their teachers against a wall. One of the cowboys says the village does not need two teachers. So, one cowboy points his pistol at the villagers. His companion asks him to at least spare the children. The cowboy fires at the teachers lined up at the wall. A schoolteacher falls to the ground, dead.



Shots fired in Timbuktu The lone cowboy shoots at one of the cowboys. He misses. In his riposte, the outlaw shoots and hits a mother passing in the street, holding her child against her chest. Mother and child fall. The mother dies. The child is wounded. The child cries over his mother's corpse. The horsemen approach. They look at the dying mother indifferently. Then they turn away. One of the cowboys laughingly boasts that he shot two people with one bullet.



Justice by a lone cowboy As he laughs, the boasting horseman is shot in the chest by the lone cowboy. He falls and dies. This creates a pandemonium among the cowboys, who start shooting from all sides, looking for cover.



NEXT DAY

A night of heat and mosquitoes The inhabitants of Bamako awake to a different dawn, to the chant of the Muezzin. To avoid both the unbearable heat of the night and mosquito bites, some of the city's inhabitants spent their night sleeping outdoors under mosquito nets.

The Morning The women got up early to prepare breakfast for the men. The fabric dyers are already at work while the men are still having breakfast. The courtyard where the court is held resumes its morning routine of prayers, cooking and household hubbub while waiting for jurists and witnesses to arrive for the day's session.

Wedding in the courtyard The court resumes but is immediately interrupted by the singing of a *griot* (bard and oral historian) announcing the arrival of newlyweds. The groom is dressed in a black suit and the bride in a white gown and veil. The *griot* comes to praise the judges, who hand her some banknotes.



The financial institutions alienate Africa The session resumes with another witness on the stand. He is a professor from Mali, who argues that Africa must refuse to pay its debts. He accuses the financial institutions of not only impoverishing Africa, but also taking away its ability to think by inundating it with Eurocentric information. The professor accuses Western countries of having developed in Africa a figure of the black collaborator supposed to ensure that the development of the West is based on the agony of Africa. The professor's speech is voiced over images of a sick man dying in bed in a dark room.



I'm off to Dakar Melé tells Chaka she is going to Dakar to live with her mother. He replies that she will leave without their daughter, Ina. Chaka tells his sister that he senses tension between her and Melé, and asks what it is about. She replies that it is rather Melé who has cut off all communication with everyone.



Chaka's hopes Chaka tells Falai, the cameraman, that he is learning Hebrew so he can be the first security guard at the Israeli embassy in Mali the day the embassy opens there. Fala laughs out loud.



Immediate solutions An English-speaking pastor preaches in his church to the Malian faithful. He promises them that the Lord Jesus has immediate answers to their problems. He leads the crowd in what he calls a “train-car hallelujah”, a repetition of hallelujahs that start slowly, then intensify and accelerate over time, like the engine of a moving locomotive. The crowd performs with arms in the air. Chaka is one of the faithful.



Destruction of cultural life A civil society witness accuses the financial institutions of blackmailing Mali and taking over the country's sensitive sectors, such as communications, energy and transport. In particular, she denounces the privatization of the Malian railway company, which has disrupted the economic and cultural life of the Malian people.



Corruption is the problem Rappaport takes offense at the suggestion that the World Bank and the IMF have destabilizing motives. He rejects the witness' assertion that she intercepted an official letter from the World Bank threatening the Malian authorities, and he urges her to produce a proof copy. Bourdon, the witness's European lawyer, accuses the judges and Rappaport of cynicism. Rappaport places the drama of Africa on the phenomenon of rampant corruption. He calls for Africa and the West to work together to solve the world's common ills, including corruption and climate change, rather than accusing the West of malice toward Africa.



Samba Diakité's dream Samba Diakité, a witness, is called to the stand. As he tells his story, Samba freezes. Later, he confides in one of his compatriots that he has a recurrent dream of a bag full of heads in a dark room. One of his compatriots advises him never to repeat this story to anyone else.



A touching narrative The old man who was asked to wait finally gets a chance to tell his story. He launches into an incantation, in which he laments the difficult conditions of rural populations. His singing moves the audience.



Subjugation of Africa by China Bourdon speaks out against the American empire and its European guards who keep Africa in a state of poverty. He warns that China will soon start to subjugate Africa and then the damage will be complete. Bourdon asks the court to find the World Bank and its accomplices guilty. He says the statistics are frightening and the figures murderous. He says that one need only look at the destruction and impoverishment wrought on Africa by twenty years of structural adjustment to be convinced of this.



The debt is violent A Malian lawyer on the prosecution team adds that Africa's debt is violent; it is illegitimate and must not be paid off. By privatizing health care, she says, the World Bank is perpetuating medieval diseases like malaria in Africa.



Chaka's death Melé is at the cabaret for her nightly gig. Chaka puts his daughter to bed and goes out. He goes to the railroad tracks and shoots himself in the head. In the morning, his body is discovered and brought back to his home yard. A Muslim funeral is organized for him. Melé, sobbing, is supported by her in-laws.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Melé Melé is a resourceful woman. She defies tradition and sings in a bar to support her unemployed husband. However, neither her husband nor her in-laws understand her, and they isolate her.

Resilient With Melé and the other women of Bamako, the filmmaker celebrates the resilience and resourcefulness of the African woman, who, in the hardest of times, has always been able to overcome adversity to safeguard her family. Chaka has lost his job as a railway worker, so Melé takes it upon herself to be the family breadwinner, even if it means doing something frowned upon by her husband and in-laws, namely singing in cabarets at night.

Isolated Melé's work in the cabarets is not supported by her husband Chaka or her in-laws, all of whom have stopped talking to her. Melé's loneliness weighs on her, and she announces to her husband that she wants to visit her mother in Senegal with her daughter. Chaka replies that she can go if she wants, but will do so without their daughter, isolating her even further. Later, Chaka takes his own life, consciously or unconsciously fulfilling his wish to isolate Melé.

Chaka Frustrated with the loss of his job and his ego bruised by seeing his wife work in a bar, Chaka nurtures the hope of one day working in an Israeli embassy, which as yet does not exist in Mali. At the end, Chaka loses hope and commits suicide.

Frustrated Chaka is a man frustrated by the situation he and his compatriots are facing as a result of the intervention of financial institutions in his country's political life. He attends the trial against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund without really being involved; he is silent, almost disillusioned. He is even more disheartened to see his wife, Melé, go out in the wee hours of the morning, only to return late at night from her work in the bars.

Diminished Chaka has a hard time coping with the loss of his job. He feels diminished and devalued, and this makes him withdraw into himself and become a stranger to his wife. In Mali's patriarchal society, men are supposed to be the breadwinners of the family. The fact that his wife, by force of circumstance, plays this role reduces him to a level he finds hard to accept.

Disillusioned There was a time when Chaka hoped to rise above his difficulties. He was learning Hebrew in order to become a security guard should an Israeli embassy open in Bamako. Chaka seems to have lost all hope in this prospect, turning instead to the promises of an evangelical preacher. When these promises fail to materialize, Chaka, disillusioned, takes his own life.

Mr Rappaport Mr. Rappaport is a character of unparalleled passion when he defends his case. His arguments in favor of the financial institutions and in favor of a perfect, all-inclusive society can, however, prove naïve. He is also a character who introduces a touch of comedy into this high-stakes court case.

Passionate Rappaport seems extremely convinced of the cause he is defending. And he defends it with a passion that challenges the decorum of the courtroom, and which must be reined in by the judges on more than one occasion. At times, Rappaport's passion and his rejoinder to the witnesses display a certain insensitivity for the plight of the Malian people.

Naïve Rappaport appeals to the witnesses, telling them that what is at the root of Mali's problems is, to some extent, the same cause that is degrading the business environment in Europe, that is, corruption. He calls on Malians to unite with the rest of the world to fight corruption. What Rappaport fails to recognize is that corruption is the organizing structure of the neoliberal policy, and that this policy is supported by a Western military system that is loyal to it and ready to intervene on its behalf in Africa.

Comical With the character of Rappaport, Sissako introduces a little humor into his otherwise very tragic docudrama. The scene of Rappaport arguing with the counterfeiter about the inauthenticity of the sunglasses he tries on during the short recess is hilarious. At one point during the recess, while Rappaport is on the phone, a ram charges him repeatedly. The lawyer, who is at first startled, realizes that the belligerent animal's leash is too short to endanger him and resumes his telephone call at a taunting distance from the ram.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Gender The structural adjustment policy imposed on Mali did more than just put thousands of men and women out of work. It has also reversed social roles. Men, who in Mali's patriarchal society are usually the family breadwinners, find themselves dependent on women's labor. *Bamako* opens with Chaka returning home in the early hours of the morning, after a night of wandering the city in search of work that never turns up. Chaka's inactivity has rendered him almost aphasic: he barely speaks in the film. Feeling demoted by his inability to secure a job, Chaka finds it hard to maintain a normal relationship with his wife Melé. He watches her come and go in disgust. Feeling neglected, she informs him that she intends to join her mother in Dakar, Senegal. In the meantime, it is Melé, not Chaka, who supports the family through her gig in a local bistro. The women's work and resilience is emphasized by the economic activities of the fabric dyers and by the women in the kitchen, who toil to exhaustion for their respective families. The financial institutions' structural adjustment policy has disempowered the men, the natural breadwinners of the Malian society, but the women step into the men's role to keep the family standing, even if this means bruising the men's ego.

Illustrative moment: Women at work. The film opens with an image of Chaka's idleness as he returns home at dawn, dragging his feet pitifully, after a whole night of wandering around the city of Bamako, while at the microphone of a local cabaret, his wife, Melé, finishes her gig. This is one of the few moments (others being when he is praying in church or asking his sister why she is not talking to Melé) when Chaka is seen standing up in the film. The rest of the time, Chaka lies in bed learning Hebrew, or sits on a bench in the courtyard, passively observing the proceedings and the women's activities. Chaka's idleness is a synecdoche of the unemployed and demoralized male population, as the courtyard teems with women at work: dyers bent over basins of indigo or drying their dyed fabrics on stretched ropes, housewives busy from dawn around the stoves cooking the day's meals, mothers nursing their children, and Melé preparing to go out for her gigs in the cabarets, from which she will only return at dawn.



Religion: Missionaries Where the African governments, in collusion with the international financial institutions, have failed and let down their people, religious denominations have arrived in plethoric numbers, promising distressed souls an immediate solution to their problems. Indeed, timidly introduced into Muslim Mali in the mid-1990s, Pentecostal churches quickly multiplied, attracting a few Muslim followers and nibbling away at a large part of the Catholic influence, which represented only 1.7% of the Malian population. After criticizing the Westernization of African economies through structural adjustment, it is with the failure of structural adjustment and the unemployed Malian's search for solutions in Pentecostalism-this religion from America-that we come full circle. Sissako seems to imply that with the Americanization of its faith, Mali is now totally controlled by the West, as it is henceforth under siege economically, culturally and spiritually. Indeed, although Islam was only introduced into animist Mali in the 11th century by the Moroccan Almoravids, the Malians consider Islam to be a quintessence of their culture and civilization. The penetration of American Pentecostalism into Malian society is therefore perceived and described by the filmmaker as a kind of hostile takeover of Malian culture and civilization by the West.

Illustrative moment: Chaka's faith. A former employee of the Régie du chemin de fer malien, Chaka lost his job when the new private buyers of the state-owned company decided to lay off 650 employees without paying them their rights. Chaka is learning Hebrew in the hope that, with the globalization promoted by the financial institutions, an Israeli embassy will soon open in Mali, offering him a job as a security guard.



While waiting for Israel - incidentally seen in this part of the world as America's little brother - to come to his aid, Chaka casts his hopes on the honeyed promises of an evangelical preacher. We see Chaka, the devout Muslim we observed during the court recess performing his Muslim prayers, among the faithful of the evangelical church run by an English-speaking preacher. Like the rest of the congregation, Chaka is absorbed by the preacher's words and drawn into a kind of trance. This raises the question of whether Chaka's suicide is not a suggestion that the Malian socius is cutting out a soul gangrened by Western ideology.

Intellectual corruption *Bamako* denounces the rampant corruption that exists not only among the populace, but also within the political class and the international financial institutions. The greatest corruption the film denounces, however, is the corruption of the minds of Africa's ruling class, who have accepted to be the hired hit men of the international financial institutions, robbing their own people, killing the future of Africa so as to get into the good graces of Europe. When African leaders are persuaded by financial institutions to allocate 40% of their budget to debt resolution, while devoting only 4% to education, there is a corruption of spirit among these leaders that has reached proportions extremely dangerous to the survival of African states. Sissako shows that for such egregious practices to be going on, the African elites must have been intellectually corrupted, conditioned by an effective Western propaganda for a long time. For those Africans, what is needed from now on is a de-neocolonization of the mind, so that a model of development can be put in place that places Africa at the forefront of its concerns, instead of treating the continent as an appendage of the West.

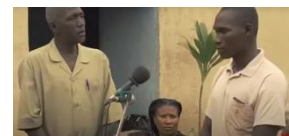
Illustrative moment In a parallel spaghetti Western scene inserted into the film and entitled 'Death in Timbuktu', Sissako offers an allegory of the brutal takeover of Africa by the financial institutions, while at the same time fulfilling his childhood dream of making his own Western. In *Death in Timbuktu*, four cowboys burst into the town of Timbuktu and start shooting people at random. One of the cowboys takes pride in having killed a mother and injured her child with a single bullet, a metaphor for the hazardous and murderous policies imposed on Africa by the Bretton Woods institutions. Incidentally, the Malian children who are sitting in front of the TV watching the film are laughing and cheering for the killing cowboys—Sissako's veiled criticism of the insidious Western media propaganda that, ever since the Buffalo Bill and John Wayne films, has taught Africans to applaud the victimizers and wish death to the victimized. The celebration of the bad cowboy in *Death in Timbuktu* is cut short when he is mowed down by the bullet of an ambushed lone ranger (played by Danny Glover). Here, Sissako seems to indicate that Western propaganda is so insidious and successful that it will take patient, painstaking education to teach Africa's rising youth to distinguish between the villains who enslave them and the lone heroes who work to free them.



POLITICS

Leadership: Mismanagement *Bamako* is a trial of the financial institutions, regarded by the Malian population and civil society as the impoverishers of Africa. However, in the eyes of the defense lawyers of the international financial institutions, led by lawyer Rappaport, Mali is responsible for its own turpitudes; it is in the context of poor political and economic governance that the financial institutions intervened, rehearsing the financial institutions' thesis that successive Malian governments since independence (1960) were failed states that had to be improved and that the intervention of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the lives of the Malians was nothing more than a salutary gesture to be commended. Indeed, whether or not one accepts this thesis, it is irrefutable that the more than one hundred state-owned companies created by Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, which, from the food to the energy and transport sectors, were the main employers of Mali's working population, have for the most part disappeared under the mismanagement and corruption of the military regimes of Moussa Traoré (1968) and Amadou Toumani Touré (1991). During these two praetorian regimes that functioned as dictatorships over which the people had no power of audit, Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world, recorded a relatively plethoric number of billionaires, all government members.

Illustrative moment: Greed and misdirected priorities. A Malian attorney, a defense lawyer for the international financial institutions, asks the following questions to a witness, a young Malian by the name of Madou Keita, who returned from his failed migration to Europe after enduring trying moments: "Have you ever



received an education from your government? Have you ever received a job from your government? Have you ever received medical coverage from your government?" To each of these questions, Madou answers in the negative. Indeed, lack of education and welfare is what has caused Madou to seek better prospects in Europe by taking the difficult migratory route through the desert only to return home disillusioned and physically and morally broken. The government of Mali has not been taking care of its people, and this is less for a lack of money than for mismanagement and misdirected priorities. The coffers of the Malian nation have served to enrich the Malian elites and the greedy financial institutions, as a civil society activist, Mrs. Traoré, points out.

Lack of Representation / Speech *Bamako* aims to restore voice to those whose voices have traditionally been silenced. When international financial institutions decide on the fate of Africa, they do so without consulting the African masses, especially the rural masses, who ultimately bear the brunt of decisions taken in the luxury offices of 1818 H Street, Washington, DC. In a logic of classification, the language of the financial institutions is the major language in which the texts of the transactions are written and the institution's programs are disseminated. The language of the people affected is considered a minor language and is simply treated as non-existent. In Mali, French, the language of colonization, reigns supreme, and Bambara, the national language of the Malians, is sidelined. Thus, the subalterns of the Malian society, who, up to now, had felt muzzled, parade up in front of the court microphone, and it is in Bambara that they speak; a gesture of defiance against an international nomenclature that tends to make them voiceless to better exploit them. An old farmer, insists on telling his story before his turn; a young unemployed man from Mali, forced into a failed emigration, returns to recount the traumas of his misadventure. And it is in Bambara that they speak.

Illustrative moments: Words needs to come out. The reclaiming of speech is dramatized in several moments in *Bamako*. Firstly, a farmer comes to the tribunal to tell his story before he is summoned. He is asked to wait for his turn, but he insists that the judges let him speak for the words inside him can no longer wait to come out. when he is finally given the floor, he speaks in the local language (Bambara) and launches into a sung narration of the miseries brought to rural areas by the policy of Structural Adjustment (the disorganization of traditional life, the loss of pride, mendacity, depopulation, and death). There is also a young man, back from a failed attempt at migration to Europe, who speaks in Bambara of how the financial institutions have prompted him to seek happiness outside of his comfort zone, bringing upon him tribulations and distress (the harsh desert crossing, the dehumanization suffered at the hands of border authorities, the death of his comrades of misfortune, and the disgraceful return home). The capture of speech is also dramatized by the voice of an exasperated textile dyer who cries out, this time in French, her disgust at the Malian lawyer who defends the practices of the financial institutions that are bringing her people to their knees. What she denounces is the neo-colonization of the mind, the action of the whole black machinery (rulers and lawyers) who continue to propagate the ideas and programmed death sold by the West to the peoples of Africa.



JUSTICE

Violence/injustice It must seem highly hyperbolic to suggest that the World Bank and its affiliate institutions are criminal institutions. Yet, this is what many activists and African academics think, and this is what Sissako, too, from the mouths of several characters of *Bamako*, maintains. Bourdon, the attorney for the plaintiff against the financial institutions, states that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are murderous institutions. The staunchest critics of the international financial institutions are convinced that the practices of these institutions mirror those of colonization. Mrs. Traoré makes the same case in her confrontation with defense lawyer Rappaport, and it would not be far-fetched to suggest that Mrs. Traoré is one of the filmmaker's mouthpieces. From this perspective, the primary aim of the international financial institutions is to syphon resources from the African continent towards Europe, and for this to take place without any hitch, Africans must be placed in a frame of mind to accept the West's ideology of domination. And just as the colonial system had its network of agents—the colonial school, the colonial administration, and the colonial armies—to either persuasively or repressively produce and maintain the subaltern conditions of the native Africans, the World Bank and the IMF, too, have their agents, diversely recruited in Europe, Asia, America and Africa, to ensure that Africans reproduce the conditions of subalterns, even in

the absence of supervision. Whenever the frame of reference of the Western financial institutions is challenged by a few farsighted nationalists, whenever these nationalists rally enough support to imperil the Western influence on their countries, they are simply eliminated by hit men—native of international—on the payroll of the Western financial institutions. Sissako makes this case in *Bamako*.

Illustrative moment: Sissako allegorizes the violence and injustice committed on Africans by the hit men of the international financial institutions with the short Western movie inserted in Bamako, and which he entitled 'Death in Timbuktu'. In the Western film, four cowboys (how more American can this be?) enter the Malian town of Timbuktu (how proverbially more remote and Third-Worldist can this be?). The horsemen (played by the filmmaker himself, Palestinian Elia Suleiman, Congolese Zeka Laplaine and Frenchman Jean-Henri Roger) come from a variety of backgrounds to show the diversity of recruitment of the agents of the financial institutions that conceal the seditious intentions of the World Bank and the Monetary Fund. What they have in common is that they hate the people of Timbuktu enough to shoot them indiscriminately and laugh about it. But it is not just the evil cowboys who laugh at their misdeeds. The children of Timbuktu who watch them on TV also laugh and cheer. This shows the insidious and subtle nature of the violence of the financial institutions, a brutality so surreptitious that even those who are the victims of it all too often applaud it, rather than applauding those who try to free them from it.



ECONOMY

Structural Adjustment *Bamako* makes a case against the World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs. What are these programs? In the 1970s, to respond to the 1973–1974 and 1979 oil price hikes, African states turned to industrial countries for huge loans for development programs that were either financially unsound or ill-managed. The African countries failed to repay their debts to the foreign lending institutions. Consequently, several of the lending institutions went bankrupt. By the time the 1979 oil crisis occasioned by the Iranian Revolution hit, African countries were faced with more conservative and reluctant lenders, higher interest rates, and the deterioration of the terms of exchange (higher prices for manufactured products from Europe and lower prices for raw materials from Africa). In the 1980s, under the guise of helping African countries get out of debts they had contracted with Western states, and allegedly get out of the cycle of poverty, the International Monetary Fund loaned money to the African states with imposed Structural Adjustment Programs. The SAPs were intended to reduce the indebted governments' ownership and management of the means of production through the sale to the private sector of state-owned companies. Other goals were to get rid of government-imposed price caps on agricultural products; devalue indebted countries' currencies; reduce government subsidies of domestic consumption; reduce government power over capital flows, private and public investments and border control; implement policies that attract foreign investments; and eliminate protectionist regulations. The IMF/World Bank's rationale for reducing African states' control of the management of state's assets, and thus privatizing state-owned assets, was that private companies were more efficient at managing businesses. This thesis, as *Bamako* shows, did not prove right. Overtime, it became obvious that these programs were only meant to further yield to the lending states the political and economic sovereignty of the defaulting states. Structural Adjustment brought poverty and social and mental alienation to Africa.

Illustrative moment: In *Death in Timbuktu*, a short spaghetti western that Sissako inserted in *Bamako* as a parallel story, four cowboys on their horses enter the Malian town of Timbuktu. They ask all the teachers and their students to line up against one of the city's mud walls. One of the cowboys declares that the city does not need four teachers. Then, one of the cowboys points his guns at the students and their teachers, turns his face away, and randomly shoots. One of the teachers falls on the ground and dies. This scene allegorizes not only the blindness with which the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have deployed their structural adjustment programs, but also the murderous nature of these programs. Indeed, the Bank's and IMF's recommendation of reductions in the number of civil servants and social programs in Africa, the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the repatriation to the financial institutions of the lion's share of the budgets of African states have all had an impact on the education, health and social well-being of Africans. It was as if these financial institutions were blindly shooting at the African populations and killing Africa's future.



Privatization: financial/political coercion The Malian railroad is one of the jewels that the Modibo Keita era bequeathed to the Praetorian regimes of Moussa Traoré (1968) and Amadou Toumani Touré (1991). Before it was totally mismanaged and dismantled, the Malian railroad, which linked Mali to the Senegalese port of Dakar with 625 kilometers of track, was a major contributor to the national economy. It employed nearly 1,600 Malians. Around its 36 stations, entire villages sprang up spontaneously and their commercial activities supported thousands of families. As one of the plaintiffs in the film noted, the forced privatization of the railway, as directed by the Structural Adjustment engineers, not only brought unemployment to Mali, but also sounded the death knell for these villages. Indeed, when the *Régie du chemin de fer malien*, an enterprise worth over 100 billion CFA francs, was sold to a Franco-Canadian company for the laughable sum of 7 billion CFA francs to be paid over 7 years, the new buyers took a number of measures that were disastrous for the people of Mali. For example, like Melé's husband, Chaka, 650 railway workers lost their jobs, sacked by the new buyers of the Régie des chemins de fer, who were eager to maximize their profits. The new masters of the Malian railroads also eliminated 26 of the company's 36 train stations, preferring the more lucrative cargo business to passenger transport, impoverished entire families and disrupted the villages that had grown up around the stations, thus forcing unemployed young people to emigrate. The story of the sale of the Régie du chemin de fer malien is more than anecdotal. This story of the impoverishment of the Malian people by rogue international speculators has played out in all those sectors of the Malian economy that have been forced into privatization by the Bretton Woods financial institutions.

Illustrative moment: Cynicism of the court. A witness makes a revelation that shakes the court and angers the defense lawyers. She claims that she has knowledge of written communication of coercion from the international financial institutions upon the Malian government. She tells the court that in the communication, officials from the World Bank told the Malian government that they would face dire political consequences if they refuse to privatize the state-owned railroad. The witness' claim sends the defense lawyer Rappaport into some agitation. Rappaport wants the witness to produce for the court a copy of the letter, and if she cannot, he wants the court to consider her allegations as a heap of lies. Rappaport is outraged that this witness and others represent the World Bank and the IMF as negative entities whose aim is to destroy the economy of Mali. As the judges ask the witness if she has material proof of her allegations, Mr. Bourdon, the prosecution lawyer, takes the floor to accuse Mr. Rappaport and the judges of cynicism. He asks them if they seriously think that this witness would put her life in danger, walking around with a letter implicating two of the most powerful institutions in the world.



Africa-oriented Development One of Sissako's theses in Bamako seems to be that Africa entered the liberalization market advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions too early. Africa should have waited for a financially strong African elite trained in good governance to emerge before embarking on the liberalization adventure. Having failed to do so, Africa now finds itself stripped by Western countries of the ownership of its strategic sectors, and therefore of its sovereignty. Sissako hints that China's example could have been useful to Africa, which, unlike China, has confined itself to its colonial role as a supplier of raw materials to the Western world, and which, today, suffers from unequal terms of trade when its raw materials, exported at rock-bottom prices, are returned to it in the form of exorbitantly-priced manufactured goods. Sissako's suggestion is that, as did China, Africa would do well to collectively resist the pressure exerted by the financial institutions to liberalize its economy in a way that only benefits foreign direct investments, and instead develop the means to build a strong middle class that will contribute to endogenous liberalism in its initial phase. This is how China became the world's factory. Its large-scale agriculture provided it with the initial resources to do so. Africa, with its varied agriculture that employs the majority of its workforce, can also build a middle class towards endogenous liberalization, provided that Africa improves the conditions for those involved in agriculture through well-thought-out decentralization that retains in rural areas an educated youth employed in the various sectors of the economy.

Illustrative moment: emulating China. The argument for emulating China towards an Africa-oriented development is illustrated at several points in the film, but most clearly when Mrs. Traoré of the civil society confronts Rappaport. Mrs. Traoré insists that her role is to raise Africans' awareness of the need to regain control of their future, which presupposes first and foremost regaining control of their means of production and establishing a form of governance geared to the well-being of Africans. Rappaport retorts that this is possible in the open world of globalization, if Africa enthusiastically accepts the principles of



globalization. Mrs. Traoré replies that globalization has never been an open world, but rather a world exclusive to the West, which closes the door on Africans, as shown by the example of African migrants tortured at the gates of Europe before being sent back to their countries of origin. She advocates that Africans stop dreaming of the world offered to them by the West through its euphemism of globalization. For Mrs. Traoré, the example of China, a country which she says is shaking Europe to its core, must be emulated by Africa. Mrs. Traoré deplors the fact that Africa has been confined to the role of exporter of raw materials assigned to it by Western countries since the days of colonization. What Mrs. Traoré advocates for Africa is an Africa-oriented development. In fact, when another court witness, a Malian professor, takes the floor, he, too, deplors that Mali opened up to privatization before it was ready, before it built for itself a strong middle-class ready to compete on the globalization market. Thus, Mali sold off sensitive sectors of its economy to foreign speculators and ended up with a scheme of development that alienates Mali both economically and culturally.

PSYCHOLOGY

Alienation The African populations remain alienated from the institutions that claim to act on their behalf. Indeed, *Bamako* shows the gap between, on the one hand, the politicians, the international institutions and sometimes the legal experts, and on the other, the African populations, who, although affected by the actions of the decision-makers, go about their lives without much thought or expectation of them. And this is because the people of Africa, generally illiterate and unaware of the debts their rulers are contracting at their expense, and of which they are only suffering the negative fallout, take their bad fortunes for granted, paying little or no attention to the debates in the upper echelons of finance that necessarily have an impact on their lives. The so-called development policies pursued by the World Bank and the Monetary Fund in Africa are bureaucratic exercises that often have very little relevance to the lives of the poor classes these policies claim to lift out of poverty. Here, money is borrowed to build skyscrapers in the capital, while rural areas are devoid of any development. Here, loans are used to build wide avenues with no sidewalks for the gleaming cars of the elite, while the little people search for a dusty beaten path along the main avenues.

Illustrative moment: courtyard routine. The filmmaker dramatizes this theme by the striking indifference with which the inhabitants of the courtyard, especially the women, go about their business, as if the court that has laid siege to their daily spaces were invisible. Melé going to the shower, carrying her bucket of water, her chest barely covered by a single piece of loincloth; the dyers, drying their indigo-dyed fabrics on ropes pulled across the courtyard; women breastfeeding their children or bent over the stoves cooking the family meal; children playing between stacks of files. All these people seem to be telling the protagonists of this international tribunal that their concerns are first and foremost local and immediate, and that life never stops for them just because the “big” questions of financial speculators have not yet been resolved.



APPEARANCE

Hypocrisy: Propaganda Bamako puts the finger on one of the greatest hypocrisies of the engineers of the new globalization: the relationship with China. The new African generation will consume more Chinese goods than did their elders, whom have been sold on the thesis of the superiority of European products. In *Bamako*, the toddler in the courtyard of Bamako, in his misspelled “Heppiness University” shirt and his shoes that squeak at every step, is an illustrative allegory of it. China has a strong presence in Africa, and China's ubiquity in Africa has never had good press from the ex-colonizers' point of view. “Avoid any rapprochement with China, for its intentions are destructive,” Africans keep hearing. Europe, and to a certain extent America, shaken by the Chinese competition in Africa, spend no single day without warning Africa against the Chinese boogeyman. However, all this is a great hypocrisy, for while it demonizes China in Africa, Europe buys from China, even borrows from China's impressive \$3.3 trillion reserve. So, for example, while France is urging its former African colonies not to trust Chinese solar panels, France and Germany are massively importing cheaper Chinese products. According to EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the European Union, based in Luxembourg (LU), in 2023, France imported 96% of its solar panels from China. What hypocrisy!

Illustrative moment: During the court recess, globalization enters the courtroom in the form of a peddler of eyeglasses offering his wares to the audience. Senior defense attorney Rappaport wants to buy a pair of sunglasses. He tries on several, but he is suspicious of their authenticity. The seller assures him that the glasses are Italian, Gucci to be precise. Mr. Rappaport is not convinced. For him, these are imitations from China, the China that haunts Europe, whether that Europe is on the side of the defense or of the accusation against the financial institutions. Indeed, like Mr. Rappaport, the impassioned European advocate of the financial institutions, Mr. Bourdon, another even more impassioned accuser of the Bretton Woods institutions, warns his audience of the imminent danger to Africa posed by China, that bird of prey with sharper claws than those of Europe. Thus, these two Europeans, with their antagonistic views on the practices of the European financial institutions, agree, all the same, on the hype surrounding China, whose presence in Africa they fear. In the final analysis, Mr. Rappaport and Mr. Bourdon are merely the hypocritical European voices who paternalistically advise Africa against doing business with China, but who themselves do not hesitate to turn to China.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the misspelling on the toddler's jersey symbolize?
2. What does Chaka's treatment of Melé say about gender relations in the Malian domestic and professional spaces?
3. How would you interpret the dream of the man who says that each night he sees decapitated white and black heads in a bag?
4. One of the horsemen (in the TV movie) who enter Timbuktu boasts of having hit two persons (a mother and her child) with just one bullet. What does this mean in the context of the financial institutions' treatment of the Malian people?
5. What criticism is the filmmaker making with the scene where a Western-like wedding interrupts the court proceedings in Mali?