

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***LIFE ON EARTH / La Vie sur terre (1998)***

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** *Life on Earth* is 61-minute docudrama showing how a small village in Africa experiences the coming of the new millennium. *Life on Earth* won several awards, including the 1999 Ecumenical Jury Award, the 1999 Air Afrique Special Award, and the 1999 San Francisco International Film Festival Award.

**Background** *Life on Earth* was commissioned by the French company Haut et Court as a part of a project of 10 films by international filmmakers depicting the approach of the Third Millennium in their different countries. Sissako was the only African filmmaker of the group. For his part, Sissako decided to film the entry into the 21st century from his native village of Sokolo in Mali. For this film, Sissako, as usual, used local actors with no prior film acting experience. The filmmaker cast himself in the role of Dramane, his protagonist, and his real-life father as Dramane's father. The languages spoken in the film are French and Bambara (Mali's national language).

### CHARACTERS

**Dramane** (Abderrahmane Sissako) A Malian living in Paris who decides to return to his native village to spend New Year's Eve with his father and take the opportunity to film village life

**The Father** (Mohamed Sissako): Dramane's father

**Nana** (Nana Baby): A young, beautiful Malian woman whom Dramane meets in Sokolo, his native village, and to whom he makes advances

**Idle young men:** A group of young men who spend their days listening to French radio and dreaming of Europe.

### SYNOPSIS

The third millennium is just around the corner. The Western world is buzzing with anticipation for this new era, preparing to enter the new century with the apprehension of the Y2K virus and the hope of a brighter future. As for Dramane, a Malian living in France, he decides to return to Africa, to his small village of Sokolo, to spend the New Year with his father. It is in a Paris supermarket, where he finds himself surrounded by all kinds of victuals, toys and insulting opulence, that he decides to write to his father, announcing his imminent arrival, his impatience to see him again, and his desire to film life in his village. Dramane finally arrives in Sokolo. He gets rid of his Western clothes, adopts traditional garb, and hops on a bicycle to rediscover his native village. What Dramane sees comes as little shock, as he predicted back in Paris: Sokolo has not changed much, or at least has gotten worse. The post office has aged badly; the village's only telephone system barely works; the village photographer, tailor and barber work, mostly in the

open air, with tools from the last era; the open-air grocery store has only a dozen products to offer; the farmers continue a losing battle against the devastating birds that raid their rice fields. And some young men, sitting idle and indifferent to the village life, dream of Europe, listening to the French radio all day long. However, Sokolo has its own seductive charm: Dramane meets up with his father, with whom he spends quiet but instructive moments; Dramane sees his friends again, including Maïga, the village radio host, to whom he has brought a number of books for his radio readings. Dramane rediscovers the charm of the low-walled, roofless outdoor shower, where you can chat with passers-by while you wash. And then, in Sokolo, there is Nana, the beautiful Malian girl with a perennial smile from a neighboring village with whom Dramane flirts and who likes the compliments he pays her, but who also takes pleasure in making him chase her. Nana, who visits the post office to try and reach her lover Baï from a remote village, never succeeds and returns to her village, sad and disappointed, just as Dramane, also receiving final advice from his father, prepares to return to France.

## SCENES

**Abundance in the West** Dramane is shopping in a Paris supermarket. The camera pans the shelves. It lingers on the dozens of varieties of cheese and butter. Dramane leaves the store with a grocery basket and a teddy bear.



**Endurance in Africa** The camera switches to an African landscape, lingering on a large, multi-branched tree. In the rice fields, children armed with pieces of cloth, waving and shouting, protect the crops from the birds.



**Homesickness** The camera takes us into the bedroom of the narrator's (Dramane's) father, who is sitting in bed under a mosquito net, reading a letter from his son by flashlight. In his letter, the son informs his father that he is happy to learn that the birds that devastate the fields have migrated elsewhere. The son tells his father that what he learns far away is not worth what he forgets about his native land. In his letter, Dramane tells his father that he will soon be returning to Sokolo, his native village. He tells him that he is coming to film village life. He also tells his father that he is coming mainly because it will soon be the year 2000, and that he feels the need to be among his people rather than in France. The father is visibly moved to read his son's letter.



**Home at last** A bush taxicab, speeding along a country road, crosses the African savannah, kicking up a cloud of dust as it goes. Some of the cab's passengers are seated on the roof of the vehicle. The cab stops at the edge of a village. Dramane gets out, carrying his bag on his back. The scenes of Dramane walking to his village and his father waiting for him in his house are voiced over with lines of late Martinican poet's Césaire's poem, 'Notebook of a Return to My Native Land' that read as follow: "To leave. My heart was humming with emphatic generousities. To leave... I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: 'I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores.'"



**Dramane in traditional clothes** Dramane sits in a dugout canoe, holding his bicycle at his side. A boy paddles the pirogue. Dramane has ditched his European clothes and his baseball cap for traditional Malian clothes and a large straw hat. The scene is voiced over by an extract from Césaire's 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land', which reads: "And on the way I would say to myself: 'And above all, my body as well as my soul beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear...'".



**Dramane sees Nana** From the pirogue, Dramane sees on the surface of the river the reflection of a young woman riding her bicycle. Dramane looks up and sees the young woman pass between the shore and the vast green fields of rice.



**Dramane's notebook** Cattle roam the streets of the village of Sokolo. Dramane is sitting cross-legged on a chaise longue in his traditional clothes. Dramane is writing in his notebook. A voiceover of the promise the letter Dramane wrote to his father covers the scene. We learn that Dramane promised his father to film Sokolo and to spend some quiet time with him in his native village, far from the hustle and bustle of Europe.



**Father and son's quiet time** Next to Dramane, on a small table, are his books and a small radio. Dramane writes in his notebook. Opposite him, his father is lying on a bed, reading a book. The scene is voiced over by a passage from Césaire's notebook: "Leaving Europe utterly twisted with screams the silent currents of despair leaving timid Europe which collects and proudly overrates itself I summon this egotism beautiful and bold and my ploughing reminds me of an implacable cutwater."



**Radio Colon** Maïga is the host of Radio Colon: the voice of rice. A large crowd gathers in front of Maïga's studio, their radios glued to their ears or placed in front of them. A herd of goats passes behind the crowd. A man on a donkey passes between the crowd and Maïga's studio. The scene is voiced over by Dramane's voice saying that he has brought books to Maïga for the oral library he runs on his radio. Maïga announces to his listeners that for their last meeting of the millennium, he has chosen to play an excerpt from Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. Dramane goes to have his bicycle repaired. Dramane listens to Maïga's radio program, which is aired on the mechanic's radio.



**A modest grocery store** A crowd of listeners gathers behind the village grocer's open-air store to listen to Maïga's show. The village grocery offers just a dozen bags of rice, half a dozen bags of corn and millet, and a few bars of soap on a table.



**An austere post office** The village postal workers operate from a small office, surrounded by piles of dusty, yellowed paper. Next to them, a small radio allows them to listen, like the rest of the village, to Maïga's broadcast. The excerpt from Césaire's poem that Maïga plays reads: "The great historical tragedy of Africa is to have encountered Europe at a time when it had fallen in the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industries. Europe is responsible before the human community of the highest heap of corpses in history."



**Dramane meets Nana** Dramane is on his bicycle. He sees Nana riding her bike in front of him. He signals his presence by ringing his bike's bell. She looks back and slows down. He joins her. She stops. He circles around her and stops in front of her. Nana jokes that Dramane almost ran her over. Dramane asks her if she is from Sokolo. She tells him that she is from the village of Kourouma, but she is in Sokolo on business. Dramane asks if they can meet again. She tells him it is possible. They set off together, pedaling side by side for a few minutes, then they go their separate ways.



**A seductive smile** Nana goes to the village tailor to have her measurements taken for a new dress. From the doorway of the tailor's shop, she smiles and flirts with someone outside who seems to be filming her, probably Dramane.



**Farmers' lives are hell and The authorities are not responding** Maïga's radio station broadcasts news in Bambara, the local language. Today's guest is a farmer from the village of Farabougou, mandated by his peers to appeal to the authorities on their behalf. He complains that the birds, which the authorities forbid them to hunt, are destroying the rice fields and making life a living hell for the farmers. The messenger from Farabougou accuses the authorities of watching the harvest disaster without reacting. He says that the government had promised to send someone, and now they say that they are waiting for the end of the new millennium celebrations to intervene.



**The village square** The grocer is seated in front of the camera under a tree. On the left, between the grocer and a small street, is the photographer. To the right of the grocer, separated by another street, is the village tailor. Dramane's bicycle comes towards the grocer and turns into the street on the right. Nana on her bicycle turns left. The two cyclists miss each other by a few seconds.



**A village in motion** A shepherd crosses the village square with his sheep. They pass between the tailor and photographer seated at their respective posts. Cart drivers carry passengers and merchandise to the market. Women and children fetch water from the well. Men protect the rice fields from birds.



**Idle young men** Some young men in Western clothes are sitting in the shade of a wall. They are drinking tea and listening to Radio France Inter, which is broadcasting the festivities of the new millennium in Paris. Men and women pass in front of them. Nana also passes in front of them on her bicycle. The young men do not look up to acknowledge them. As the shade diminishes, the idle young men move back towards the wall. Eventually, the shadow disappears completely, and the idle men are fully exposed to the sun. They stand up, fold their chairs and leave.



**I saw it with my own eyes** The village photographer is chatting with a friend, who shows him a magazine photo of the latest Izuzu Pajero. He tells him that this is a Japanese car with a very powerful engine. The photographer's friend also tells him that in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, some white people have built houses whose doors open automatically as soon as you walk up to them. The photographer replies that this is impossible, and that such doors cannot exist. The friend swears that he is telling the truth, and that he saw the doors with his own eyes.



**A not-so-intimate shower** Dramane showers in an outdoors shower. His clothes are laid out on the shower wall. His naked torso protrudes from the wall, above which he has placed a mirror. His face is covered with shaving cream. Nana arrives on her bicycle and stops right by the shower wall to speak with him. Dramane is visibly pleased to see Nana again. They exchange greetings. Dramane wants to know where Nana lives. She tells him that she will tell him someday, but not now. They exchange pleasantries and say goodbye. Dramane rides his bicycle down a village street. A man's soaped head protrudes from the outdoors shower stall. Dramane stops and exchanges greetings with the man. Then they say goodbye.



**The Telephone Connection is not working** At the village post office, signs from SOTELMA (Société de Téléphonie Malienne) announce that telephone service for all is the company's priority. The only telephone in the village is at the post office. Several customers try to call people in neighboring villages and towns, but the connection fails. Nana goes to the post office several times, but she is unable to reach her friend Baï, who lives in a faraway village. Nana falls asleep on the post office counter, waiting for Baï to call. The telephone rings, waking her up. The postal worker answers. It is not a phone call for Nana.



**Dramane cannot reach Marie** Dramane receives a phone call from a friend, Marie, from France. The postal worker tells Marie that he will send someone to fetch Dramane, who will call her back in 10 minutes. The postal worker sends a boy, who, kicking his soccer ball, runs to fetch Dramane. Dramane arrives and tries to call Marie back. The connection fails.



**A photo for the New Year** The inhabitants of Sokolo come to the village photographer to have their photo taken. Nana also has her photo taken. She smiles brightly. The smile turns into a sad expression.



**A cry for help** The village tailor asks Dramane to write him a letter for his brother in France. The tailor asks his brother for financial help. He writes to his brother that famine and death threaten his family, and that if he receives nothing from his brother, death will overtake them.



**Death of the tailor's child** The little postal messenger is sitting in an alley, leaning against a wall, his deflated balloon in hand. He looks sad. A procession of men returning from the cemetery crosses the village. The tailor is in the front row. The men have just buried the tailor's child. As they pass, the children stop playing, the men and women stop working.



**Dramane prepares to return to France** Dramane walks through a vast rice field beside his father, who has his arms crossed behind his back. Their words cannot be heard. The scene is accompanied by a voiceover of a passage from Césaire's Notebook:



*And we are standing now, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand puny in its enormous fist, and now the strength is not in us but above us, in a voice that drills the night and the hearing like the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp. And the voice complains that for centuries Europe has force-fed us with lies and bloated us with pestilence, for it is not true that the work of man is done that we have no business being on earth that we parasite the world that it is enough for us to heel to the world whereas the work of man has only begun and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in the recesses of his fervor and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest and we know now that the sun turns around our earth lighting the parcel designated by our will alone and that every star falls from sky to earth at our omnipotent command.*

**Nana leaves** Nana sits pensively on a tree trunk in front of her bicycle, her head in her left hand. Then we see Nana, bent over in front of her bicycle. She is pumping the wheel of her bicycle. Nana straddles her bicycle. We see her back, as she pedals towards the village exit, her suitcase resting on the luggage rack. Nana leaves without collecting her photos from the photographer. A villager sees Nana's photo and exclaims that he has never seen Nana this sad.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**DRAMANE** Dramane is like the poet whose passages he quotes. He is proud of his origins and fully aware of the rich values of Africa. He refuses to stand idly by as a spectator of the continent, instead taking part in its development.

*Proud* Dramane is a man proud of his heritage and the lessons of wisdom he received from his father. These are cultural gifts he is determined not to lose. So Dramane decided to return to his native village to celebrate the new millennium with his people. Upon his arrival in Sokolo, Dramane trades in his Western clothes for traditional ones and blends into his village community.

*Self-conscious* In the supermarkets of Paris, where he is overwhelmed by the abundance of consumer products while his people back home scrape by on crumbs, Dramane realizes that as a consumer, he is

participating in the perpetuation of inequality between the North and the South. He realizes that the expensive manufactured goods that surround him may well come from raw materials bought at low prices from his own people. Returning to Sokolo, Dramane participates in his own way in rectifying this injustice by taking part in the economic life of his village; whether by paying the boat-boy for his crossing, paying the mechanic to repair his bicycle, giving books to Maïga, having a traditional garment sewn by the village tailor, or shopping at the local shop.

*Empathetic* Dramane understands and empathizes with his people's challenges. In the garb of Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, whom Dramane quotes extensively in his letter to his father, and whose works he gives copies of to Maïga for his radio library, Dramane criticizes the West's condescending and prejudiced view of Africa. Like Césaire, Dramane decides to return to "embrace the hideousness" of his people, the people of whom he is proud.

**DRAMANE'S FATHER** Dramane's father is a calm, silent man. We do not hear him say a word in the film. However, his wisdom and serenity permeate through his posture and are inspiring to his son.

*Wise* We learn from Dramane's letter to his father that he decides to return to Mali mainly because he fears forgetting his father's lessons of wise counsel. Dramane's father is therefore a source of guidance for him. The father says nothing in the film. However, his wisdom is suggested by his posture. The rosary he beads while sitting on his bed is an indication of his piety. The books he devours in the company of his son suggest that he is a well-read and informed man. And his roman patrician position, lying on his bed in the courtyard, suggests discernment.

*Serene* Dramane's father is a calm man. He is shown either seated at the edge of his bed, rosary in hand, or stretched out in his bed in the posture of a philosopher, book in hand. At no point in the film is he heard or seen moving, even though the entire village is bustling with activity. Only at the end of the film, when his son is certainly preparing to return to France, is the father seen with him in the green of a rice field. And here, although we cannot hear the conversation between father and son, we can imagine the father calmly advising his son to participate in the impetus of Sokolo, and of Africa, as confirmed by the voiceover at the end, taken from Césaire's poem: "We are standing now, my country and me, our hair in the wind, my tiny hand now in its enormous fist ..."

**NANA** Nana is a jovial young woman whose smile conceals a certain sadness. She takes pleasure in flirting with Dramane, but in fact she is waiting for a phone call from a man, which never arrives, and which fills her with disillusionment.

*Jovial* Nana is a jovial, friendly young woman with a perennial smile. She is easy to talk to and jokes with Dramane from the first moment she meets him. However, beneath Nana's cheerful exterior lies a sorrowful soul. This other side of Nana's personality appears in the photo she took on New Year's Eve, and a man in the village, who saw this image of Nana, exclaims that he never thought Nana could be so sad.

*Flirtatious* Nana is a flirtatious young woman. She knows that Dramane is attracted to her, and she gives him a run for his money. She offers him suggestive smiles, lingers to talk to him over his shower wall, and promises to tell him one day where she lives, keeping him on the embers of desire. But this is just a game, because Bai, not Dramane, is the one Nana is desperately seeking.

*Disillusioned* Determined to get back in touch with her friend Bai, Nana made repeated visits to the post office. The poor telephone connection proved to be a formidable obstacle in her quest. On top of this, Bai, for whom she had left a message asking him to call her back, never did. Betrayed by the communication system and by her friend who never bothered to make an effort towards her, Nana leaves Sokolo, disillusioned.

**THE UNEMPLOYED YOUTH** These idle young men represent an Africa that has given up. Fascinated by the West, they forget to get involved in village life and spend their days passively dreaming of Europe. The bustling life going on around them does little to engage them.

*Westernized* The unemployed youth are all dressed in Western fashion. They wear jeans, button-down shirts, polo shirts and, for some, baseball hats. Their favorite channel is Radio France Inter (the most listened-to French radio station in French-speaking Africa). Their favorite program is the broadcast of the new millennium festivities in Paris. Although they are physically in Sokolo, psychologically they are in Paris, the city of their dreams.

*Passive* Sokolo is a busy town. In front of these unemployed young men, men and women pass by, on their way to the market or back from the fields. These young people watch life happen in Sokolo without playing a part. They spend their days drinking tea and dreaming of France. Their contribution to the social, economic and cultural life of Sokolo is nothing. They voluntarily cast themselves as outsiders to the community.

## THEMES

**Communication** The end of the 20th century heralded the golden age of communication. The world has made a quantum leap in the exchange of information, with great strides in the development of computer technologies with the invention of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Sokolo, however, like Africa as a whole, is still on snail mail. Sokolo is not yet connected to the Internet network enjoyed by the Western world. Clearly, this digital divide isolates this small Malian village, which in the film is a metaphor for Africa, from the rest of the world, holding it back in every sector. Whereas in the Western world, farmers equipped with satellite-connected tractors produce quality harvests over large surfaces, in Sokolo, the farmers try as best they can to protect their small harvests against drought and birds, often losing this battle and being left to starve and die. Whereas in the West, the anomaly for anyone who decides to correspond with a distant interlocutor is that the communication is faulty and interrupted, in Sokolo, or in Africa, the anomaly is that communication takes place without a hitch. The digital divide in Africa is such that what should astonish or offend becomes what is naturally expected.

*Illustrative moment:* At the Sokolo post office, not only are we still in the age of old-fashioned fixed-line telephony, but we are also in the age of a single point of fixed-line telephony. The only telephone in the village is at the village post office. The telephone connection is extremely unreliable. And when the connection miraculously goes through, a little barefoot boy, kicking his ball in front of him in the maze of Sokolo's dusty alleyways, goes looking for the other party. The boy is the messenger, who spends his days playing at the post office, waiting for his next mission. Dramane receives a phone call from his French girlfriend, Marie. The little footballer courier runs to fetch him, while the postmaster advises Marie to wait for Dramane's call in the next ten minutes. Dramane arrives ten minutes later, but communication between Sokolo and Paris has broken down, and Dramane has to come back another day to hope for better communication. Similarly, neither Nana, nor a soldier, nor all those who pinned their hopes on the Sokolo post office telephone have been able to reach their respective contacts. Communication is impossible, or at least very uncertain, in Sokolo. This failure of communication makes it impossible for Africa to compete with developed countries. Whose fault is it? Sissako doesn't place all the blame on the West, but a large part of it on the indolence of African governments.



**Exile** *Life on Earth* conveys a message of resistance to exile. Sissako seems to be telling young Africans, fascinated by the bounty of the West and convinced that Europe is the center of the universe, that happiness is not necessarily to be found in the West, but can also be built locally. The filmmaker juxtaposes some contradictory scenes: There is, on the one hand, the image of the disillusioned exilic subject who decides to return to his homeland. On the other hand, there is the image of an unemployed youth dreaming of leaving the village. The exilic subject's return is supported by lines from Césaire's long poem, 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land', where the poet, eager to come back to his people, proudly declares that he is returning to the ugliness of his people. But there really is no such thing as hideousness, or so the filmmaker seems to tell us. There is only hideousness for those who, like the young, idle men seated against the wall, do not know how to look, and who view Africa through the prism of the West. For these Africans with contaminated eyes, nothing is beautiful, nothing is possible, nothing is achievable in Africa; and leaving is their greatest dream. With their eyes turned towards the West, they idly wait for the opportunity to take them

away from Africa. On the contrary, for those whose view of Africa is neither superficial nor tainted by Western prejudices, Africa is a land of beauty.

*Illustrative moment: the dream of exile kills the desire to see inwards* Dramane lives in France, and is seen in a Paris supermarket wearing a long coat and wide-brimmed hat. In a letter to his father, Dramane expresses his eagerness to return to his village, Sokolo. He wants to see the new millennium arrive there with his family. As soon as he arrives in Sokolo, Dramane hastily discards his European clothes, puts on the traditional garb of his compatriots, and hops on a bicycle, the means of transport of Sokolo's wealthiest citizens. One of Dramane's first encounters in Sokolo is with Nana, a young Malian woman whose beauty seduces him, and to whom he tries to make advances. Nana is a cinematic metaphor for the beauty of Africa. And yet, the young Malians, dressed in their European clothes and with their ears glued to their radios broadcasting the New Year's festivities in Paris, watch Nana go by on her bicycle several times without taking much interest in her. For them, beauty is in France, and Nana, Africa, is far from being of interest. The allegory is clear: Africa is far too focused on the West to understand its own beauty and potential. It took Dramane's return from the land of the other to fully appreciate what his country has to offer. The call of exile, the dream of elsewhere, kills the appreciation of the here and now, even the will to do things here.



**Globalization** In the very first minutes of *Life on Earth*, Dramane, the film's main protagonist, writes a letter to his father, announcing his return to his native village of Sokolo. Dramane writes that he would like to spend the new millennium with his father, taking the opportunity to film Sokolo, and he adds that he very much doubts that the new century will bring any change whatsoever to Africa. Dramane's pessimistic vision of the 21st century is built on a juxtaposition of the hectic, highly consumerist pace of the West and the moderate, relatively slow pace of Africa. It is in a Paris supermarket, where Western consumerism sprawls as far as the eye can see, in the abundant display of vertically and horizontally arranged delicacies, that the subject becomes aware of the excesses of the West, in which he participates while Africa is scraping by, and that he decides to return to his native land. There, the progress of the late 20th century, trumpeted by globalization, has never gained a foothold: people still travel by donkey or bicycle; roads are still bush paths; telephone communication is uncertain; the post office, the radio and the public library are dilapidated; famine is rampant and murderous. In the native land, people spend their days dreaming of elsewhere, preferably the West, of which they are but an appendage.

*Illustrative moment:* The very first scenes of *Life on Earth* take place in a Paris supermarket. The film's protagonist, Dramane, basket in hand, shops in front of dizzying displays of victuals. Dramane then watches a woman try on a canvas hat in front of a mirror. Dramane exits the supermarket, basket in one hand, a teddy bear in the other. The raw materials for all these victuals on display, for the customer's hat or for Dramane's teddy bear, certainly come



from African palm oil, coffee, cocoa and cotton. Dramane is the consumer of home-grown products that the people back home will never know about. This scene of abundance contrasts sharply with the Sokolo grocery store, set up in the open air under a tree, where choices are limited to a few bags of rice and corn and a few canned goods, or cigarettes sold individually. As the third millennium begins, the prosperity heralded by globalization is slow to appear in Sokolo. Technology, as seen in the tools used by the farmers, the tailor, the photographer and the village postmaster, remains archaic. In fact, the photographer is amazed that, as one of his customers tells him, in Abidjan there are doors that open automatically when approached. Globalization, the concept of the so-called free movement of technology, people, goods and capital, is a misnomer for Africa, a concept whose positive implications have yet to be proven.

**Community** French-speaking literature from Africa and the West Indies often treats the exile of black people in metropolitan France as a traumatic experience. The African subject in France, and by extension in Europe, is generally portrayed as a disoriented subject living in a physically and conceptually cold, distant, and unfriendly country. If the exiled subject decides one day to return to his native Africa, this is because in Europe, his difference and isolation become burdensome. In Europe, the exilic subject is the other, both in the way he feels and in the way he is perceived or felt by his host country. The protagonist of *Life on Earth* rightly makes Martinican Aimé Césaire's long poem 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land'



his own and quotes it extensively in the film's voiceovers. In Europe, isolated and objectified, the exiled subject becomes aware of the value of his people and his native land and decides to go back home. This return is made without any idealization of what life will be for him in his African village of Sokolo. The subject does not expect to find in Africa the abundance that marks the West. He is aware that his native land is a suffering place, but he has decided to embrace this suffering as his own, for beneath Africa's wretched surface lies a natural beauty and cultural richness that he can find nowhere else: a harmonious community to which he belongs and in which everybody's contribution is valued, even that of a barefoot little boy kicking his soccer ball in the dusty street of the village.

*Illustrative moments: Nothing is private* Sissako tackles the theme of community in his film. The well that brings the village women together becomes a place where gossip and news are exchanged. The radio is never listened to in solitude. Like the well, the radio is a community builder and consolidator. The malfunctioning telephone means that conversations between individuals, which under the best of circumstances should have an air of intimacy, enter the public realm. To reach her lover, Nana must call someone in her village who has a telephone, who in turn will send someone else to fetch her lover. Showering in Sokolo is never a private affair. Passers-by stop to converse with the soaped heads or shaving foam-covered faces that stick out from the walls of the outdoors shower stall. The village photographer welcomes his clients in the open air. And at his improvised studio, passers-by and the curious stop to admire the work of the craftsman or simply to make conversation. When a member of the community passes away, all activity comes to a halt. The children stop playing as the men return from the cemetery. The women stop pounding rice, and the blacksmith suspends his hammer blows. Nothing in Sokolo, or almost nothing, is private. On the contrary, everything is a matter of community.



**Isolation** As the year 2000 approaches, the world is buzzing with anticipation and anxiety. People are preparing to enter a new millennium full of promise and hope for science and technology. In medicine, the 20th century gave us penicillin and extraordinary vaccines that eliminated frightening diseases, especially in Europe and the Americas. In the 20th century, biology made an enormous leap forward in the field of genetic code. In technology, the 20th century offered us the beginnings of robotics, and in communications, the World Wide Web, the Internet and the smartphone, enabling us to make extraordinary strides in communication, navigation, games and research in general. The 21st century is already shaping up to be a century of extraordinary innovation. However, there is still one concern: that of Y2K, an unforeseen virus which, according to experts, would infect all computers and all the entities (factories, infrastructures) that depend on them, bringing the world to a standstill and causing an apocalypse. For Africa, however, which has seen a relatively insignificant benefit from global innovations due to a derisory transfer of new technologies, life goes on, untroubled by the concerns of the Western world.

*Illustrative moments: Africa suspended in time* Sokolo is Africa cut off from the rest of the world life and going about its quotidian life deprived of the great technological discoveries. Farmers work cooperatively on small plots of land on which they plant rice and battle devastating birds to preserve their meagre harvests. The village photographer works with an old camera from the last century. The village tailor spends his days in front of his old Singer foot-powered sewing machine. The only telephone in the village is a vintage one, housed in the dilapidated post office. Effective telephone communication is tantamount to winning the lottery. Sokolo is still a village of mules and carts. Sokolo is Africa isolated, suspended in inertia, while the rest of the world moves forward in the digital age.



**Beauty** Africa's rural regions are beautiful, life is simple, and people live according to the rhythm of nature rather than the frenetic, perilous pace imposed by human ambition. Indeed, from ethnological essays to novels, literature in praise of this serene, peaceful Africa abounds. The ethnologist Léo Frobenius hailed what he called the man-plant nature of the African, that is, his propensity to be one with the universe rather than trying to transform it, and the Senegalese poet Senghor praised what he called the intuitive memory of the Black man as opposed to the more calculating and domineering discursive and Cartesian memory of the White man. Sissako's film plays a little into this register of romanticization and idealization of Africa, presenting us with a peaceful, close-knit village community, where calamities such as famine, alienation

and death are never endogenous but rather exogenous. Thus, Sokolo, the native land, is a kind of idyllic space that unites the main protagonist with his family, friends and customs, harmoniously and without tension. The object of love is beautiful, like Nana. The land is beautiful, like the vast fields of rice under the beautiful blue sky, and communication in the local language, when not thwarted by the Western technology of the telephone, is perfect. Sissako's Sokolo is organically bathed in exoticism.

*Illustrative moments:* Sissako offers his audience the beauty of Africa both in the physical splendor of the continent's women and in the solidarity, conviviality and collectivism of the African people. The physical beauty of Africa is symbolized by the character of Nana, a vigorous, determined woman with a perennial smile, friendly but prudish. Nana's beauty captivates Dramane from the moment he returns to Sokolo, filling him with amorous expectation. But Sokolo, or Africa, is also beautiful for the tight-knit community that rallies to save the rice fields from devastating birds, that gathers in the public square to listen to the news. It is also the solidarity of immigrants in Europe, who financially support their relatives back home. The beauty of Sokolo is an empathetic community where the death of a child is felt by all, from the youngest to the oldest. Perhaps the greatest beauty of Sokolo is its simplicity, its reliance on the bare minimum and its avoidance of the superfluous, a simplicity that Dramane rediscovers once he has traded his Western clothes for traditional garbs and adopted bicycle power.



**Quest** *Life on Earth's* Africa is beautiful, of course. But that does not mean that the people of Sokolo do not express a quest for elsewhere. This quest is voiced both explicitly and implicitly. On the eve of New Year celebrations around the world, the people of Sokolo, with their radios glued to their ears or gathered around their neighbors' radios, seem to be more preoccupied with what's going on in France, such as the preparations for the new millennium celebrations reported on French radio, than with life in Sokolo. This attitude certainly reflects the notion that the ideal of life lies elsewhere, beyond the Sahelian desert and the Atlantic Ocean, in Europe, and that this is where it must be sought. Thus, the village postmaster explains to Marie, Dramane's girlfriend who calls from France, lamenting the winter cold and envying the African heat, that for Africans, the sun is more of a nuisance than an exotic element, and that the rays it shines on the population are the source of many inconveniences. The drought, which makes life hard for the farmers, comes with famine and death, as the village tailor proves when he asks Drame to help him write a letter to his brother in France to bring them some money before hunger decimates his entire family, because, as he explains to his brother, even when it's hard in France, it's never as hard as in Sokolo. Going off to seek something else, whether materially or in thought, is one of the hallmarks of the protagonists in Sissako's films.

*Illustrative moments: Inaccessible France* The Sokolo post office houses the village's only telephone. And villagers take turns using it all day long to communicate. Nobody, or almost nobody, manages to get a normal connection. Nana cannot reach her lover; a young soldier has trouble contacting his headquarters. Dramane is unable to communicate with his French girlfriend. And all these people, the postmaster first, in their quest for perfect communication, would have liked things to be like in France. The unemployed young people of the village of Sokolo also dream of this France. Sitting all day along a wall whose shadow is fading inexorably like their aspirations, they avidly listen to the RFI (Radio France Inter) reports on the French celebration of the new millennium. Sokolo is idyllic, much more so than the Nouadhibou of Sissako's second film, *Waiting for Happiness* (2002).



**Rootedness** *Life on Earth* is like an antithesis to *Waiting for Happiness*. And it is fitting that the film is regularly laced with voiceovers of passages from Césaire's long poem, 'Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal'. Indeed, instead of a flight from the homeland, the film's main protagonist makes a joyful return to his native land. This homecoming is made all the more successful by the fact that, in the village, Dramane willingly immerses himself in the traditions of his people. Here, time is spent reading and listening to the radio with his father, in the reassuring tranquility of the family courtyard, far from the hustle and bustle of the Parisian metropolis. Here, the bicycle is the most modern means of locomotion, competing on dirt paths with donkey-drawn carts. Here, showers are taken in the open air, with a bucket of water brought in from the village well. Here, when the subject meets a beautiful young lady whom he would like to get to know, the words are

frank and direct, unencumbered by the politically correct language of the Western world, which silences the subject more than it gives him agency. Sokolo would be idyllic if the birds were not ravaging the crops, causing desolation, famine and death.

*Illustrative moments: A Man and his people* Whereas in *Waiting for Happiness* Sissako gives us a main protagonist, Abdallah, who has difficulty integrating into his community, in *Life on Earth* we are presented with the character of Dramane, a man rooted in his culture, a man who is one with his people, not alienated from them. Dramane, who lives in France, decides to return to his native village of Sokolo to celebrate the new millennium with his family and friends. As soon as he arrives in his village, Dramane ditches his Western clothes for traditional pants and tunic, and immediately hops on a bicycle to visit his friends. Unlike Abdallah from *Waiting for Happiness*, who does not understand his mother tongue, Dramane understands and speaks Bambara with ease. Here, the main protagonist's happiness is not deferred. Dramane lives in the here and now, biting Sokolo's life to the quick, spending precious moments with his father, showering in the family outdoors shower, making passes at the beautiful Nana, a girl from the neighboring village. Dramane is a character with his feet firmly planted in the traditions of his village. He is a man at home among his people. Dramane is the voice of Césaire, the poet who returns to his native land, embracing it with all its beauty and ugliness.



**Survival/struggle** Africa is a continent of a thousand resources. Africa is also a continent of a thousand unresolved challenges, one that is struggling to take off. Africa's development difficulties are due to the compounded effects of extraordinary natural disasters and the indolence and unwillingness of its ruling elite. Indeed, Africa's climatic conditions expose it to extreme droughts, regular devastating bush fires, soil degradation, destructive floods, exterminating tropical diseases and invasions of crop-destroying species. If the effects of these natural calamities persist in Africa, this is because the majority of the continent's governing elites are so careless and incompetent that no priority is given to finding solutions. Sissako's treatment of these issues is neither exhaustive nor explicit. Nevertheless, his allusions are highly suggestive.

*Illustrative moments: A losing battle against death* At the microphone of the local radio station hosted by Maïga, a farmer talks about the difficulty of working in the fields and the battle that farmers are waging against natural disasters and bird predators that destroy their crops. The farmers criticize the government for doing nothing to help them, and for making them wait for unfulfilled promises. Sissako shows the resilience of the people of Sokolo, who are trying to survive with very little infrastructure: the postal workers who coach their customers through the meanders of an archaic and uncertain communication system, the women and children who toil to draw water by hand from deep wells, the photographer, the tailor and the barber who try to get the best performance from rustic tools. And all these efforts seem to be losing the battle against famine and death, when the men of the village return from the cemetery after burying the tailor's baby. Sissako's film is full of deictics that express Africa's struggle for survival



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does *Life on Earth* challenge both the West and Africa to work for the betterment of the human condition?
2. To which specific characters in the film can Césaire's lines "beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator" apply?
3. Why does Dramane's presence in the Paris supermarket make him feel guilty?
4. While Dramane adopts African clothes as soon as he arrives in Sokolo, a group of young men from Sokolo sitting along a wall listening to French radio are dressed in European clothes. What message is the filmmaker trying to convey by juxtaposing these two contrasting images?
5. What symbolism do you see in the scene of the sun gradually consuming the shadow of the wall protecting the idle young men of Sokolo, to the point of making them fold up their chairs and leave?
6. What is the filmmaker trying to tell us in the scene where Dramane and Nana, both arriving at the village square a few seconds apart, veer off in opposite directions and miss each other?

7. Considering that Nana in the film symbolizes Africa, how would you describe the filmmaker's depiction of Africa?