

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, Ph.D.

Nyamanton/The Garbage Boy (1986)

Cheick Oumar Sissoko (1945-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Born in 1945 in San, Mali, Cheick Oumar Sissoko (sometimes spelled Cissoko) is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker and director. After graduating from the University of Paris with a degree in sociology and African history, Sissoko studied cinema at the Ecole Nationale Louis Lumière, then returned to work as a filmmaker at the *Centre National de Production Cinématographique* in his native Mali. Later, together with other Malians, Sissoko founded a film production company called Kora Films. Sissoko also became involved in Malian politics as the co-founder of the African Solidarity for Democracy and Independence party, in 1996. In 2002, Sissoko is appointed Minister of Culture, a portfolio to which is added that of Minister of National Education, which he holds until October 2007. Sissoko's internationally acclaimed films include features such as *Nyamanton/The Garbage Boy* (1986), *Finzan/A dance for Heroes* (1989), *Guimba The Tyrant* (1996), *La Genèse/Genesis* (1999), and *Battù* (2000).

Film *Nyamanton* is a film dramatising one of the major issues plaguing Africa in general and Mali in particular, that of education. With this film, Sissoko intends to show that no development will be possible in Africa until African countries invest in the education of their youths, who constitute 50% of their general populations. The film also tackles other issues, such as health, responsibility and gender.

Background This 94-minute docudrama in Bambara (Mali's national language) was first pitched for financing to the Malian government as a 30-minute documentary on children and education. Cheick Oumar Sissoko used the \$26,000 he received to hire a crew of 9 Malian technicians and amateur actors to make the film. *Nyamanton* was well received in Mali and drew an audience of 35,000 people on the opening day.

CHARACTERS

Saran A Malian woman, who works as a maid in a wealthy family of Bamako
Chaka Saran's husband
Kalifa The nine-year-old son of Saran, who works as a garbage collector
Fanta Kalifa's sister, who sells oranges

SYNOPSIS

Nine-year-old Kalifa and his sister, Fanta, have been expelled from school because they do not have desks. The school inspection requires each pupil to come to school with his or her own desk, and every day the roads to school are flooded by little schoolchildren carrying their own desks. Kalifa's mother, Saran, pleads with the teacher to allow her son to attend classes sitting on the floor, but the teacher refuses, fearing he will lose his job. Kalifa's parents rent him a cart, so that he can earn money for his desk and for his tuition by working in garbage collection in the city of Bamako. Meanwhile, his sister, Fanta, also sells oranges to earn money for her school fees. The two siblings go to school in the morning and work in the afternoon. The streets of Bamako, teeming with hundreds of children-turned-beggars, garbage boys, street vendors and pickpockets, are a trap for Kalifa and Fanta. On the streets of Bamako, Kalifa develops vulgar and obscene language, and learns to steal and smoke. As for Fanta, she is beaten by boys who steal her oranges and is sexually harassed by adults. The children manage to save a little money for their tuition, but their aunt, Founé, who (like their mother) works as a maid in the household of an abusive rich family, has a complicated parturition. When the hospital's negligent services finally agree to examine her, they do nothing more than hand her husband, Bakari, an expensive medical prescription. Bakari comes to his brother, Chaka, the father of Kalifa and Fanta, for help. Chaka hands over his children's savings to Founé to keep. The children are convinced that they will end up poor like their parents. This seems to be confirmed. Indeed, after Founé dies in childbirth, Saran, their mother, must give up her job to look after Founé's

newborn son. Kalifa and his Fanta, now the family's main breadwinners, return full-time to their jobs as garbage boy and orange seller.

SCENES

POOR PEOPLE

Children were Expelled from School Kalifa comes home from school crying. He tells his mother, Saran, that he and his sister, Fanta, have been expelled for not having desks. Kalifa's mother goes to see the teacher, who explains that the rules require students to bring their own desks. The mother pleads for Kalifa to attend class sitting on the floor. The teacher replies to Kalifa's mother that the inspection will not allow it, and that he risks being punished if he allows a student to take lessons sitting on the floor. A little schoolgirl arrives carrying her desk on her head. Saran rushes over to relieve the child of her heavy burden. She points out to the teacher that it is not normal to make such small children carry desks.



Hunger Karim, the son of a blacksmith, has been expelled from school because his father has not paid his school fees. The blacksmith asks his son how many times they ate the day before yesterday and yesterday. "Only once," replies the child. The blacksmith tells his son that they have nothing to eat today, and that this should tell him that they are a long way from paying his school fees. Karim asks his father what they're going to do about his schooling. The blacksmith tells his son that sooner or later he will be expelled from school anyway. So why bother going to school now? The blacksmith adds that even with diplomas, the boy will still be unemployed.



Saran and Founé work as maids Kalifa's mother works as a maid for a wealthy family in Bamako. While she cooks and launders for her employers, Karim babysits his baby sister. Founé, Saran's sister-in-law, also works as a maid. She is pregnant and almost full term. Saran advises her to stop working until she gives birth. Founé replies that she cannot afford to stop working.



Working to pay for school Kalifa and Fanta decide to work to pay for regular schooling. The sister sells fruit in the streets of Bamako. The brother had a cart rented for him to collect and dispose of the garbage from people's homes. Kalifa's first customers are his mother's employers. Kalifa bargains the price of his service with his mother, who speaks on behalf of her employers. Kalifa's mother thinks that his prices are a tad high. Kalifa and his mother finally come to an agreement.



A city of poor children Kalifa bumps into two other little garbage collectors, who ask him if he is new to the job. Kalifa replies that he goes to school in the morning and only does this job in the afternoon. One of the boys tells him that he will end up like them, a full-time garbage collector. The little garbage collectors resume their activities in the streets of Bamako. Alongside them, other children, some bare-chested and barefoot, sell fruit, vegetables and other items, or beg in the maze of cars and passersby.



Father and Son Kalifa tells his parents that he is tired. His father decides that he should rest that afternoon. Kalifa's father takes his son into town. He shows him the miserable life of children who have dropped out of school. He shows him the poverty of peasants who, like him, have immigrated to the city in search of better conditions, which they have never found. Kalifa worries that he and his sister might never be able to finish school.



Kalifa is punished Kalifa begins to slide into delinquency. He is insolent towards his mother. He comes home late. He smokes cigarettes. His mother complains to his father. Kalifa's father gives him a severe whipping.

Founé is in labor Chaka's sister-in-law, Founé, is having contractions and needs to be taken to the clinic. No cab will stop for her. Founé's husband, Bakari, decides to take his wife to the hospital by bicycle. A motorist almost runs them over. The motorist volunteers to take them to the hospital. Bakari leaves his bike on the side of the road and gets into the car with his wife. Founé arrives at the hospital in pain. The doctor, busy escorting his girlfriend, passes Founé without paying any attention to her. The waiting room is crowded with unattended patients.



Chaka gives away the children's tuition money Bakari returns to fetch his bicycle. It is no longer where he left it. Bakari has a medical prescription to fill, but he does not have the money to do so. He goes to see his brother Chaka. Chaka orders his wife, Saran, to hand over all their savings, including money for Fanta and Kalifa's schooling, to his brother for Founé's medicine.



We will end up like our parents Kalifa tells her sister that she has to face the facts, and that they will never amount to much. Kalifa tells his sister that their destiny is to be like their parents—she, like her mother and he, like his father. Fanta bursts into tears and tells her father that she wants to study to become someone. Fanta asks her father why some people have everything they want while others have nothing. Chaka advises his daughter to remain optimistic, that the world is changing. Kalifa tells her sister to console herself, that she will find a husband to take care of her. Fanta replies that she wants to study and expects no misery from a husband.



Chaka attacks the principal Chaka goes to the principal. He asks him why the school is not free when parents pay taxes. The principal responds to Chaka with insolence. Chaka chases him with a club. The principal locks himself in his office.



Fanta is molested Fanta is molested by an adult while selling her oranges. Fanta's oranges are scattered on the ground. The men find the scene amusing and laugh, while little Fanta cries.



The results of our living conditions Fanta and her brother have some bad news for their mother: they have failed school. Their mother tells them she understands. She tells them that this is simply the result of their living conditions. The children of Saran's boss move up to the next class. They celebrate their success and mock Kalifa and Fanta.



Saran's nightmares Saran has nightmares. In her dream, her son, Kalifa, has become a criminal, incarcerated in a local prison. Her daughter, Fanta, has become a prostitute. Saran wakes up with a start and calls to her children. Kalifa and Saran reassure their mother. They ask her to go back to bed, as she is ill and has two babies on hand now that their aunt Founé has died. They tell her they must go to work. The children say goodbye to their mother and go back to work full time.

RICH PEOPLE

Barou's Father is cheating The boys see Barou's father in the street trying to pick up two women. The two women get into a fight, and one of them tells the other that the man is not worth fighting for because he is married and a cheater. Exposed, Barou's father gets in his car and speeds away.



Barou's Mother Kalifa and Karim inform Barou that his mother says that she is not his mother. Barou replies that his mother was probably joking. The boys insist that she was very serious, and said she was his aunt. Hurt, Barou goes to ask his mother why she disowns him. Barou's mother tells him that this is not the case, and that he must not believe everything those poor kids from the streets say.



Rich kids The children from rich families are dropped off at school by chauffeurs in luxurious cars that are parked all day long in front of the school waiting to take them home. The children from poor families walk to school, carrying their desks



Rich People's home Fanta, the little orange seller, and her brother Kalifa, the garbage collector, come home at dusk. They look very tired. They immediately drop to the floor in front of their mother, who is preparing dinner for her employer. Kalifa and his sister talk about the hard day they have had. Meanwhile, in the living room, the children of their mother's employer relax in front of the television. Fanta helps her mother set the table for the bosses. The little girl stops for a moment to admire the bosses' table. It is filled with food and fruit of all kinds. She also catches a glimpse of the TV in front of which the boss's children are comfortably seated.



Inside the rich people's household Kalifa and Karim climb a tree to see what is going on in Barou's parents' courtyard. They see Barou's sisters complaining to their mother about her favoritism towards Barou. They see Barou's mother's ignorance in matters of cooking. They see Barou's mother seek attention by faking a headache as soon as she hears her husband come home. She suddenly feels better as soon as her husband leaves for the pharmacy. The two boys come down from their tree perch, laughing at what they have seen. They pray that God will spare them from such a woman, false and unwilling to grow old. They conclude that rich people are insincere, giving their children silly nicknames like "pretty" or "jewel".



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

KALIFA Kalifa is a street-smart, hard-working boy, with a negative perception of women. This goes at the heart of the education he received both from his parents at home and from the street of Bamako, where he works and survives as a garbage collector.

Street-smart Forced to work as a garbage boy to help his parents pay for his schooling, Kalifa forged his survival skills on the streets. He learned to negotiate the best price for his services. He learned to jostle with other street boys and use coarse language to gain respect. But he also learned to steal and lie to feed himself.

Hard-working At just nine years old, Kalifa displays the dedication and hard work that some adults lack. Up early in the morning, the little boy helps his parents with household chores before setting to work on his own account. Knocking on Bamako residents' doors, Kalifa hauls their household waste to the city's garbage dumps. The child gives himself just a few minutes' rest. When he comes home at nightfall, he is so tired that he falls on the floor, sometimes asking his grandmother to massage him. Many adults, like the

negligent doctor and nurses of the maternity ward where Kalifa's aunt died giving birth, would do well to emulate the young garbage boy's work ethic.

Chauvinistic At the age of nine, Kalifa's language towards women is already degrading. He thinks women are stupid, vain, liars and dependent on men. To his sister, Fanta, who complains about the difficulty of walking long distances to sell oranges on the street, he replies that women's work has never been as difficult as men's work. When Fanta worries that she may never have enough money to pay for her schooling, Kalifa tells her that she really has no need to go to school and that she will find a hard-working husband to take care of her anyway. When the mother of his playmate, Barou, pretends she is younger than her age, Kalifa explains to his friend Karim that Barou's mother's conceited attitude is typical of all women in their thirties.

SARAN Saran is a hard-working, forward-looking mother, who wants a better life for her children. Like most maids in Mali, Saran works in the house of a wealthy family with no legal protection against her bosses. They exploit her beyond her strength.

Hard-working Saran is a hard-working woman. Every day of the week, she walks from the suburbs, where she lives, to the city of Bamako to work as a maid for a wealthy family. Before that, she rises before dawn to do the cooking and housework for her own family. When her sister-in-law Founé dies in childbirth, Saran takes it upon herself to look after Founé's baby, as well as her own. She works so hard that in the end she falls ill.

Forward-looking Saran is a poor woman who believes in her children's education as a factor in changing their future. She wants a different life for her children from the one she leads, and she encourages them to make school their priority. So when Kalifa is expelled for not having a desk, Saran goes to beg the schoolmaster to allow her son to take lessons sitting on the floor. When he refuses, she rents her son a garbage cart so he can earn money for his school fees. Her sister-in-law, Founé, needs money for her hospital care, and her husband hands the money they saved for their children's tuition to Founé's husband. Saran is against her husband's decision, but she is obliged to comply.

Exploited Kalifa asks his father why his mother does not have a single day off during the week. Chaka tells his son that there is no legislation to protect maids, and that they are left to the mercy of their employers. Through Saran, Sissoko denounces the exploitation of maids in Mali. Indeed, every well-off family in Mali employs one or more maids. These girls or young women, who like Saran, work from dawn to dusk, are exploited beyond their strength. When they fall ill from exhaustion, they are simply sent back to their families and replaced.

FANTA Fanta is a little girl determined to go to school, and she would not hear it otherwise either from her brother or her father. She sells oranges in the street to raise money for her schooling. However, the streets of Bamako are a dangerous place for a little girl like her.

Determined Fanta is a child determined to go to school. Like her brother, Kalifa, Fanta has been expelled from school because she has neither desk nor books. However, the little girl decides to sell oranges to raise the money to buy a desk, and thereby ensure her education. Money is hard to come by, and her brother Kalifa begins to lose hope, telling her that they are both doomed to repeat the poor life of their parents. Fanta insists that she will go to school no matter what. She goes to see her father to tell him that she has no intention of being poor in the future and that she wants to go to school. Despite the little girl's determination, the odds seem stacked against her.

Helpless Fanta must sell oranges to help her mother pay for her schooling. However, Fanta's trade in Bamako's streets exposes her to the malice of boys and men. Bamako's petty criminals beat her and steal her oranges. Adult males sexually harass her. In the city of Bamako, like most girls in Mali, little Fanta is vulnerable to the intolerance of males, who believe they have God-given rights over her.

CHAKA Chaka is a hard-working man who feels trapped by a system that keeps placing obstacles in his way to make a better life for his children. He resents the fact that his son Kalifa seems to be falling into juvenile delinquency, complicating his already difficult childhood. Chaka straightens his son out with corporal punishment.

Trapped Chaka, Kalifa and Fanta's father, wants his children to enjoy a better social status than his own. He takes his son to the city to show him what happens to those who miss out on an education: they become a class of paupers. Chaka works hard to ensure that his children do not fall into the cycle of poverty. However, despite Chaka's efforts, the system seems to be stacked against people like him, and Chaka feels trapped, unable to realize his dreams, which come up against the many pitfalls that beset the lives of the poor. No sooner does Chaka save a little money than problems arise, forcing him to take out loans, which put him deeper into debt.

Disciplinarian Chaka wants his children to have a bright future. This also implies that they behave with dignity in a Malian society that, according to Chaka, has lost all its bearings. On the streets of Bamako, Kalifa begins to turn to delinquency and becomes increasingly insolent towards his mother. When Saran reports her son's behavior to Chaka, the outraged father vigorously whips the boy until the boy's grandmother comes to take him out of the father's hands. Chaka tells the grandmother that he and his wife sacrifice too much, trying to set their children on the right path, for him to tolerate Kalifa's poor behavior.

THEMES

Education With this film, Sissoko puts his country's education system on trial. The film's protagonists, from the oldest to the youngest, recognize the transformative value of education. Chaka, the father of Kalifa, the garbage boy, takes his son to town to show him what happens to those who miss out on education. Chaka shows him the little beggars and street vendors of Bamako. He shows him the peasants who, like himself, have fallen victim to the disillusionment of the city. Education is the gateway to changing people's social conditions. And yet, it seems as if the Malian government is working to close the door of education to the poor. Malian education is not free. Everything must be paid for, from desks and books to fees and transportation. And the children of the poor, unable to overcome the financial obstacles placed in the way of education, find themselves repeating the lives of their parents. Kalifa tells his sister that she will end up like her mother, and he, like his father. To ensure his studies, Kalifa rents a cart and gets paid to rid the rich of their household trash, while his sister, Fanta, sells oranges. Kalifa and Fanta are convinced that their fear of ending up like their parents is materializing when the father uses the money the children have saved to pay for their schooling to pay for his sister-in-law Founé's medical prescriptions. Founé, who has worked as a maid for a rich family until the last month of her pregnancy, dies in childbirth. Saran must now take care of her sister-in-law's newborn baby as well as her own. To do this, Saran, who also falls ill from working too hard, can no longer carry on with her job as a maid. The two young siblings, Kalifa and Fanta, become the family's main breadwinners, fulfilling the prophecy of the vicious cycle of poverty. The cases of Kalifa and Fanta are a palpable example of the state's failure to educate its youth.

Poverty Sissoko also criticizes Mali's state power as moribund when it comes to fighting poverty. Mali, like most African countries, has failed to prepare its human resources. In 1986, when Sissoko was making his film, the proportion of the Malian population aged between 0 and 14 was 45.58%. In 2022, it is 47%. In other words, the proportion of Malian youth of primary and secondary school age is around half of the general population. Of these young people, 67% of girls and 62% of boys will never go to school and will be dumped by their parents at an early age into the workforce to earn money in informal activities which, if they don't predispose them to juvenile delinquency, prepare them for a life of poverty. In the streets of Bamako, Kalifa and his 'business' partner, Karim, are two garbage boys who learn the obscene language of the street, smoke cigarettes and steal food. Kalifa even begins to be insolent towards his grandmother and mother, who complains to his father. The state's dereliction, its disinvolvement from the children it has a responsibility to educate and prepare for the future, encourages systemic poverty, placing these children on the difficult path of their parents rather than enabling them to break the cycle of poverty.

Hygiene Bamako is an insanitary city. The government has given up on managing the city's garbage. The people of Bamako coexist as best they can with the garbage that obstructs the streets and sidewalks and poisons the lives of city dwellers. Mali's children are responsible for cleaning up the city's garbage. Bamako's streets are teeming with little garbage boys, like Kalifa and Karim, pushing carts loaded with garbage to improvised dumping grounds, which the wind, animals, beggars and recyclers storm, scattering here and there throughout the city, contaminating the air and water. While collecting garbage provides poor Malian children with the means to bring home a few coins to contribute to the family's pittance, this activity exposes them, much more than adults, to illness and injury. Indeed, most of these children, like Kalifa and

Karim, handle the garbage with bare hands and feet, in addition to suffering from diseases such as typhoid fever, yellow fever, chronic respiratory illnesses and malaria; they are also victims of bites from insects and stray dogs, cuts from broken bottles and injuries from rusty metal. Malian insalubrity, which is indicative of the government's inability to protect its environment, endangers the country's population, especially its most vulnerable members, the children.

Class Every year, many Malians from rural areas, driven out by the difficult living conditions of the peasantry, emigrate to the country's capital in search of jobs. The exodus of these peasants does not always meet with the success they had hoped for and ends in disillusionment. Chaka, Bakari and their families are among those Malians who have found nothing but disillusionment in their migration. This disenchanted population constitutes the poor class, facing an intelligentsia class, educated, professionally equipped, or simply part of the ruling class or gravitating in the sphere of power. Each of these two classes, the rich and the poor, believes it holds the truth and righteousness. Barou's mother tells her son never to believe what the children of the poor say. For her, the truth lies with the rich. However, Kalifa, from the top of the tree where he spies on the movements of Barou's family, sees favoritism, deceit, disloyalty and falsehood in the rich. So, the child asks God to protect him from a woman like Barou's mother, adding that the rich are all liars, who give their children nicknames that are as ridiculous as they are insincere. Rich and poor alike find in the conviction that they are right the means to live without hating themselves. Kalifa loves his family as much as Barou loves his own.

Social injustice Little Fanta asks her father how it is that some people always lack everything, while others never lack anything. Indeed, Fanta and her parents belong to a social class whose members are always considered second-class citizens, who do not benefit from the country's riches, which they nevertheless help to create, notably the peasantry. The struggle for recognition of the peasantry is a subject at the heart of Sissoko's social struggle, and one that recurs frequently in his films. Indeed, in most sub-Saharan African countries, the peasantry makes up at least 70% of the working population. They are the mainstay of agriculture, on which most sub-Saharan African countries depend. Although farmers are often praised in official speeches as the suppliers of the national granaries, they are rarely rewarded for their efforts when it comes to the redistribution of national wealth. The wealth produced by peasants is reinvested in urban areas to improve living conditions for city dwellers, while rural areas remain infrastructural deserts: no hospitals, no schools, no leisure centers, often no water or electricity. This neglect of rural areas by the state is driving peasants to migrate to urban areas, where they struggle to survive and are exploited, as Saran, Founé, Chaka and Karim are, because they are poorly equipped professionally. The destitute condition of the African peasantry is the result of a great social injustice for which African governments are responsible.

Health Founé, Kalifa's aunt, is about to give birth. She must be rushed to hospital. There is no point in calling an ambulance because the service simply is not available. In addition, there is no local hospital in the poor suburb where Founé lives. So Founé's husband, Bakari, decides to take his wife on his bicycle to the hospital, which is in the center of Bamako, the Malian capital. Fortunately, a kind-hearted man offers to take Founé in his car. When Bakari and Founé finally arrive at the hospital, they are met with the neglectful atmosphere typical of Malian health centers. Patients are crammed together in the heat of the corridor, in conditions that encourage the transmission of disease. In the maternity ward, women in labor cry out in pain, calling for help. The doctor does not care. He has other things to deal with. His girlfriend has come to see him at his office, and he flirts with her, ignoring the suffering of the patients. Mali has no reliable health institutions, and even less properly trained health personnel, both technically and ethically, to care for patients. This lack of human and technical resources in the health sector has fatal consequences. In 2020, according to the *CIA World Factbook*, maternal and infant mortality reached 67.6%. Founé, who dies in childbirth, is part of these figures, which in 1986, when *Garbage Boy* was filmed, were even worse.

Gender The discourse on gender is very much present in the film to the point that it is easily picked up by the young generation. Women are portrayed in the film as vain, insincere and lazy, but this characterization is aimed above all at the educated woman of the wealthy class, represented by the mother of Barou, a teenager and friend of the two garbage boys, Kalifa and Karim. Barou's mother, who spends her days sitting in the courtyard of her beautiful villa putting on make-up and listening to music, works neither outside the house nor inside it. She has a maid to whom she gives orders, and to whom the household chores fall. Barou's mother is so detached from the kitchen that she does not know the names

of the fish her husband brings home from the market, and which she asks the maid to make into a delicious stew. Moreover, her obsession with passing for younger makes her tell the garbage boys that she is not Barou's mother but rather his aunt, that is, his mother's younger sister. Karim and Kalifa, the two garbage boys, are so disappointed with Barou's mother that the former asks God to spare him from such a mother, and the latter points out that he already has a good, hard working, and sincere mother, and that it is rather a future wife like Barou's mother that he should ask God to spare him from.

Tradition vs. modernity Saran, Kalifa's mother, and Founé, Kalifa's aunt, are hard-working, protective mothers who stand by their husbands. For the filmmaker, they symbolize the strength of the traditional woman, in clear contrast to the modern woman represented by Barou's mother. These peasant women, who have followed their husbands to the city in search of a better life, fleeing the harsh conditions of peasant life, sell the skills they have acquired in the village to the wealthy in the city. Founé, nine months pregnant, and her sister-in-law, Saran, work from dawn to dusk, every day of the week, as cooks and housekeepers for wealthy families. Up very early, they first look after their own household before leaving for their work, from which they only return at nightfall. They are the pillars of their families, whose work supports that of the men, who also sell their services in town. The courage of Founé, who works until the last month of her pregnancy, or the dedication of Karim, Founé's husband, who transports his pregnant wife on his bicycle because the cabs refuse to take her, contrast with the laziness of Barou's mother and the duplicity of Barou's father, who crisscrosses the city in his luxurious car to pick up women. Through these characters, the filmmaker sets traditional values against modern ones.

Responsibility/irresponsibility Founé, Chaka's sister-in-law, is nine months pregnant. She is having contractions and has to be rushed to hospital. The cab drivers refuse to stop, not daring to take on the responsibility of losing a patient in their vehicles. They certainly have plenty of stories to tell about cab drivers who got into trouble trying to help patients. So, they choose to move on, ignoring the emergency that summons them. Here, they would say, dereliction of duty is the order of the day. Bakari, Founé's husband, decides to take his pregnant wife to the hospital by bicycle. The journey is long and difficult, and Bakari, tired and shaking on his bicycle, loses control and falls in front of a car, which almost runs over him and his wife. The driver, feeling guilty, agrees to take Founé, suffering and wailing, to hospital. For the doctor and his nurses, urgency seems a mere figment of the imagination. While patients wait in the fetid heat of the hospital corridors, while pregnant women in labor cry out for help, the doctor flirts with his girlfriend, walking past the patients, indifferent, even accompanying his girlfriend all the way to her car in the hospital compound and lingering there in loving embrace. However, the greatest disengagement is that of the Malian state, which fails in its commitment to educate Malian children, whatever their social background, and which favors children from wealthy backgrounds by instituting schooling conditions that the poor cannot meet. And so, unable to afford desks, books and school fees, Kalifa and his sister are convinced that they will end up in poverty, like their father and mother.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What incentives do societies have in making primary and secondary education free?
2. How is child labor viewed in your country? Why?
3. Do you think that health coverage should be available to everyone? Why or why not?
4. How far has your country come as far as garbage collection and management is concerned? Do you think that more can be done? Explain.
5. The language of Kalifa reflects a certain anxiety about what it takes for a boy to grow up to be a man in Malian society. What are these anxieties?
6. Fanta, Kalifa's sister, says she wants to go to school so she does not have to suffer the miseries inflicted by men. What are these words telling us about the condition of Malian women?
7. Is Chaka's decision to sacrifice his children's school money for Founé's care a wise or a foolish one? Please elaborate your answer.