

Sarraounia (1986)

Med Hondo (1936-2019)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Med Hondo, whose real name was Mohamed Abid, was born on May 4, 1935, in Ain Beni Mathar (Morocco). Hondo was born of Mauritanian and Senegalese parents. His mother was from a Mauritanian slave caste (the Haratin ethnic group). After some culinary studies in Morocco, Med Hondo went to France in 1956, where he did several jobs, as a cook, a dockworker, and a farmhand. Hondo studied theater in Marseilles and later went to Paris, where he appeared in several classic plays by Molière, Racine and Shakespeare. In 1966, with a few friends from Africa and the Caribbeans, Hondo founded the Griot-Shango theatrical group to feature works from African and Caribbean playwrights. Hondo has produced several documentaries and five features, including *Oh, Sun* (1969), *West Indies* (1979), *Sarraounia* (1986), *Black Light* (1994), and *Fatima, the Algerian Woman of Dakar* (2004). Hondo did the French voice on screen of actors like Sidney Poitier, Eddy Murphy, Danny Glover, Muhammad Ali and Morgan Freeman. Med Hondo died in Paris on March 2, 2019.

Film With *Sarraounia*, Med Hondo continues the tradition he began with his debut feature film, *Oh, Sun* (1969), of critiquing France's imperialist ambitions. While preserving a vital piece of African resistance history, Hondo also explores themes such as feminism, colonial violence, dehumanization, objectification, and racism. The film's remarkable narrative and powerful message earned it the prestigious Étalon de Yennenga (Grand Prize) at the 1987 Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO).

Background The film *Sarraounia* was originally planned to be shot in Niger, but authorization to film there was unexpectedly withdrawn at the last minute by Nigerien authorities. Fortunately, late Burkinabe president Thomas Sankara, a dedicated Pan-Africanist, stepped in to provide assistance and resources, enabling the production to be relocated to Burkina Faso. The film is an adaptation of Abdoulaye Mamani's 1980 historical novel *Sarraounia: le drame de la reine magicienne*. Mamani, a Nigerien writer, played an active role in collaborating with director Med Hondo to craft the script for the film.

SYNOPSIS

In 1898, as neighboring African tribes fell to the brutal French military campaign of Captain Paul Voulet and Lieutenant Julien Chanoine, Sarraounia, the animist queen of the Lugu kingdom, chose to stand against the French invaders. Sarraounia had already thwarted numerous attempts by her Muslim neighbors to conquer her kingdom and impose Islam, earning their hostility. When Captain Voulet's expedition turned towards Lugu, her neighbors saw it as an opportunity to see her defeated, even if it meant collaborating with the French. However, these tribes underestimated Voulet's ruthlessness. He was a soldier whose brutality extended not only to the tribes he "pacified" but also to his own men and allies. His campaigns left a trail of destruction—burned villages, massacred men, and violated women. Those who allied with him fared no better, as Voulet betrayed agreements and turned his cruelty on his own soldiers, especially those reluctant to confront Sarraounia, who was rumored to possess dark mystical powers. The confrontation between Voulet's forces and Sarraounia's army was marked by extreme brutality, leaving lasting effects on Voulet and his men. Descending into madness, the captain unleashed his fury on his soldiers, executing many in his weakened ranks. He declared independence from the French high command and killed an officer sent to restrain him. Ultimately, rebellion broke out among his troops and captives. The captive women killed Lieutenant Chanoine with a saber blow to the back, and Voulet was riddled with bullets by his own soldiers. Meanwhile, Sarraounia fortified her alliances with other African tribes, uniting them to resist the French.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Sarraounia (Aï Keïta): animist queen of the Lugu kingdom, who resists French colonization

Paul Voulet (Jean-Roger Milo): French captain, who has vowed to submit Queen Sarraounia, and whose fixation on his quest drives him to madness

Julien Chanoine (Roger Miremont): French lieutenant and Captain Voulet's assistant

SCENES

Give her a great education In the Azna kingdom of Lugu, Sarraounia's father places his teenage daughter under the guidance of his trusted friend, Dawa, to shape her into a formidable warrior. Dawa counsels Sarraounia to steer clear of the trivial distractions often associated with women, as she is destined for an extraordinary future. He also instills in her the principle of never submitting to the whims of egocentric men.



Sarraounia's training Accompanied by her mentor, Sarraounia ventures deep into the savannah to undergo rigorous training in archery and hand-to-hand combat. During their time together, Dawa imparts his profound knowledge of the animist faith and African pharmacopoeia to Sarraounia. He unveils the mysteries of healing herbs, those capable of causing harm or death, and the remedies that counteract poisons. Through this journey, Sarraounia begins to master both physical prowess and mystical wisdom.



Resisting Islam On their way to the fields, the people of the Lugu kingdom spot armed horsemen clad entirely in white, with white caps crowning their heads. These are the Muslim Fulanis from Sokoto, infamous for their campaigns of forced conversion against non-Muslim communities. Alarmed by the sight, the Aznas of Lugu hurriedly warn the kingdom's warriors of the impending threat. Mounted on her white horse, Sarraounia, now a fully-grown leader, takes charge and leads her people in the defense of their kingdom against the invading forces. Sarraounia's warriors position themselves in the thicket and behind the savannah hills. As the enemies surge forward, Sarraounia releases the first arrow. Her warriors follow suit, firing their arrows and rifles at the enemy. The enemy, visibly surprised by the level of resistance put up by the queen's people, retreats in disarray. The invaders flee, shouting that Sarraounia is the devil incarnate.



Praise for Sarraounia Accompanied by his kora (a stringed musical instrument), the griot of the kingdom begins a song in honor of Sarraounia. The griot praises Sarraounia's warrior strength and mystical powers. Baka, Sarraounia's lover, is not too happy about the praises to Sarraounia.



Baka leaves Sarraounia Baka, Sarraounia's beloved, gets angry. He gets up, throws his cape on his chair, and leaves the room. He goes to let off steam by practicing archery with his soldiers. Sarraounia picks up Baka's cape and covers his shoulders. She tells him that he is a great soldier, and that her kingdom needs him, but that she will not tolerate his vanity and arrogance. Baka throws off his cloak, breaks his bow and exits the palace courtyard.



Long live France A voiceover announces that it is the end of the 19th century. In Berlin, the Western powers are dividing up Africa. The continent is being invaded from all sides by European nations. A column of French colonial soldiers, ammunition and food carriers and



white officers crosses the savannah. In broken French, the African soldiers sing the glory of France: "Long live France, the beautiful country that is France, our father, our mother".

The French Worry Sarraounia Sarraounia tells her mentor that she is worried, because she has heard of bloodthirsty white men marching on her kingdom. She says that these men, armed to the teeth, sow death and desolation in their wake, stealing their victims' livestock and crops and turning the survivors into slaves. Although visibly concerned, her mentor reassures her that they will be able to defeat the invaders.



A trail of ruins The camera pans on some corpses of women and children lying in a burning village. black soldiers of the French colonial army herd chained captives into their camps. A white captain, Paul Voulet, lies on his tent bed, his hand on the waist of his black captive companion lying on a floor next to him. She is sobbing.



The men are afraid Coulibaly, Captain Paul's black assistant, comes to tell him the outcome of the attacks: many dead among the enemy, five killed by poisoned arrows among the African soldiers (tirailleurs). Coulibaly says that the men are afraid to advance towards the Kingdom of Lugu, as they have heard rumors that a sorceress queen, Sarraounia, reigns there. Captain Paul replies that the rumors about Sarraounia are part of British propaganda meant to scare his men. He gets up and orders his slave companion, whom he calls a *biquette* ('little she-goat'), to go and wash her bottom. Outside, a black guide is whipped for refusing to lead the captain's troops to the kingdom of Sarraounia. A French officer, Lieutenant Julien Chanoine, asks Captain Paul why he is so keen to take on Sarraounia, to the point of turning away from the military objectives set by the headquarters. The captain replies that Sarraounia represents a myth for the Africans, which must be broken unless the French want to hand the blacks a psychological victory.



Life in the camp Life in the colonial army camp is organized like an African village. The men sharpen their weapons. The women pound grain and cook for the soldiers. A native tirailleur is brought before the officers. He is accused of wasting 125 cartridges. The captain pulls out his pistol and shoots him in the head. A black soldier, Tiémogo, threatens to kill another, whom he has caught in bed with a woman who is his war booty. The camp's white doctor observes a group of black women deep in conversation. He is visibly attracted to one of them. The woman approaches him and makes eyes at him. The soldier tells her, visibly uncomfortable, that he "cannot". The woman shrugs and returns to her group.



The Muslim conclave A gathering of several Muslim clans takes place. Speakers take turns to address the gravity of the moment: white soldiers accompanied by black troops, armed to the teeth and bloodthirsty, are making their way east, killing, raping women and pillaging granaries. Some of the speakers call for clan feuds to be put to rest, and for a common front of resistance to be organized. Others prefer that the white soldiers be left to deal with the animist witch Sarraounia, who has always humiliated them. One of the notables remarks that, despite everything, Sarraounia has never tried to impose her beliefs on them, and that she deserves their help. The king concludes that they are not strong enough to protect Sarraounia from the Whites. He asks that they not interfere in a quarrel that is not theirs. He proposes that Sarraounia be left to her fate and the will of Allah.



We hope you will spare us Paul's troops arrive in a Muslim village. They are greeted by the village notables, who say they welcome them "whatever their intentions," and offer them hospitality within their walls, as well as chickens. The notables tell the captain that they hope he will spare their village from the fate suffered by other villages.



All they want is kill whites The captain laughs at the pleas of the village elders. He tells his lieutenants that, like the other Muslims, these people want nothing more than to kill all the whites and form a Muslim wall impenetrable to France. The captain gives orders to attack. The village is destroyed, its crops set on fire, its population decimated, and its women abducted and raped. The survivors are buried upright, with their heads above ground. Soldiers riding their horses play a game of skill, slicing off their victims' heads at full gallop. The captain looks on with an air of satisfaction. The black lieutenant distributes the war booty to his men in proportion to their bravery.



Gold for the British Majesty In the territories occupied by the British troops, caravans arrived at English forts laden with gold for the British Majesty. These caravans are led by thousands of Fulani Muslims, defeated by Sarraounia's army. They have pledged allegiance to England, and have taken refuge in Sokoto, where they brood over their revenge against Sarraounia.



The emir wishes Sarraounia dead An informer tells the emir of Sokoto that the French are advancing towards the kingdom of Sarraounia, the emir's northern neighbor. The emir rejoices at the news and announces that he hopes Sarraounia, the snake who has humiliated him more than once, will die at the hands of the white invaders. The Emir of Sokoto holds a secret meeting with his advisors. He tells them that their duty as believers is to help the whites eliminate the infidels of Sarraounia's kingdom. He asks them to pray secretly for the whites, so that their mission to destroy the Azna kingdom ruled by Sarraounia will be a success.



The women praise Sarraounia The king of the Tuareg is also worried about the White man's coming. He explains that he sees in it the end of his kingdom's glory, for if the whites defeat Sarraounia, a new order will be established that will halt the free crossing of the desert and the trade in grain and slaves that has made his kingdom so prosperous. However, he accepts that Allah's will be fulfilled. Sitting apart, the women sing and clap their hands to the glory of the great Sarraounia, whose name defies the passing of time.

Complaints against Paul Captain Paul is furious because a black corporal has dared to write to Paris that the Captain is ordering pointless killings for the simple pleasure of seeing African blood spilled. The captain calls him a traitor and has him shot. black soldiers bring in the severed hands of raid victims to justify the cartridges used. Lieutenant Julien rewards them with women and oxen. Colonel Claude is dispatched by the headquarters to stop Captain Paul. Colonel Claude's troops come across the atrocities committed by Captain Paul: men hanging from a tree and an old man sitting under the tree who, in a monologue, wonders why foreigners think they are entitled to killing blacks.



The betrayal of Serkin Arawa Serkin Arawa, an Azna king, comes to see Coulibaly, Paul's assistant, at night. Serkin tells Coulibaly that his men will lead Paul to Sarraounia if Paul promises to spare his kingdom. Paul doesn't keep his promise. On the contrary, Paul cuts off certain territories from the kingdom of Serkin Arawa. The king's son comes to tell his father of the disappointment of the people, who feel humiliated. The king replies that a man must know how to bend before the storm, and that Paul is too strong an adversary.



Serkin's prince will join Sarraounia The king's son accuses his father of cowardice. He says that unlike his father, Sarraounia, will not surrender without a fight. She will defend her honor, and the honor of her people. The prince announces that he will join Sarraounia, and he invites the men of his father's kingdom to follow him to fight under



Sarraounia's banner. King Serkin Arawa curses his son and tells him that he will never inherit his throne. The prince replies that no one would want to inherit a throne devoid of honor. The father wants to take out his sword against his son. His notables hold him back. The prince leaves, accompanied by some of his father's army.

Captain Paul cut ties with his headquarters French troops are beginning to build up on the edge of Sarraounia's kingdom. A messenger brings Captain Paul a message from the Niger High Command. The captain quickly drafts a reply, which he hands to the messenger, and then he announces to his white officers that he has just cut ties with the Niger command. He tells them that he is tired of listening to the bureaucrats' complaints. Paul's officers whisper that Paul's insubordination is a rebellion that will cost them their promotions and land them in prison.



France is our mother Paul, his officers and his column of black soldiers march off, singing, "France is our mother, she's the one who feeds us, with her potatoes and macaroni. When war comes, we are her proud soldiers... always courageous".

Sarraounia scorns Serkin Sarraounia tells her troops, made up of men and women, to prepare to face the French, who are on their way to their kingdom. She tells her warriors that Serkin Arawa, whose kingdom neighbors hers, has opened his gates to the invaders and fed them. She says that he is a traitor and a coward who favors those who covet Africa's wealth.



The cowries are silent Sarraounia goes to consult the kingdom's oracle to find out what the cowries predict. The oracle tells Sarraounia that the cowries are silent, and that this is worrying, as it's a sign that hard times lie ahead for the kingdom. Sarraounia asks the oracle to make the necessary sacrifices and offerings so that the spirits will give her warriors the strength to fight.



Stereotyping The white officers throw a party, and their black concubines accompany them. While the whites eat at the table, the black women sit apart, around communal dishes. The officers discuss the sexuality of black women and Asians. One of them says he witnessed a scene where a woman was raised on a table with a horse behind her.



The women hate the white officers The officers joke that the only way to check whether the Negroes have completed their missions is to ask that they bring the hands of their victims. One of them says that bullets have curious effects on the Negro's body, that they enter the body through a small hole, without any blood gushing out, and the Negro falls gently on his side. The black women listen in disgust. They whisper that they hate white people and hope that Sarraounia will kill them all. The black sex slaves of the white officers talk about the whites' perversity in bed. They also express sympathy for Sarraounia and discuss ways of alerting Sarraounia about the whites' plans to attack her and the whites' strategic position.



The Black Soldiers are sad The black soldiers play the *balafong* (a type of xylophone) and sing. They sing of the bitterness of having followed the white men away from their villages, their homes, their rivers and their families, whom they may never see again. Lieutenant Julien appears on the arms of a woman. He wants to know why the soldiers look so dejected. The soldiers miss their families. Coulibaly explains to Lieutenant Julien that their native Sudan is far away, and that the soldiers are sad to have left their homeland. Coulibaly adds that the soldiers are also afraid to face Sarraounia. The lieutenant tries to convince the soldiers that Sarraounia's warriors are outnumbered and outgunned.



The Emir's messenger at Paul's camp The Emir of Sokoto's emissary arrives at Captain Paul's camp. He is violently apprehended. He says he has come on behalf of the Emir of Sokoto, who wants to offer Paul help in his quest to kill Sarraounia. He promises him a guide and charms for this. Paul does not believe him. Instead, he thinks it is a subterfuge by the British. Paul demands that the emissary's head be cut off and sent to his master. The emissary swears he is not a British spy.



A timely storm A storm descends on the French camp. Lightning flashes threaten tents and ammunition boxes. The soldiers set about extinguishing the fire. Some soldiers are convinced that Sarraounia's fetishes are responsible. Panic-stricken soldiers and porters try to desert. In the confusion, many porters and officers' sex slaves manage to escape.



Baka to the rescue Sarraounia's estranged companion, Baka, receives news that white soldiers, aided by blacks armed to the teeth, are preparing to attack Sarraounia. He gathers his army to rally Sarraounia's kingdom. Meanwhile, the Prince of Serkin Arawa also joins Sarraounia with his army. Baka arrives at Sarraounia's court to take his place among the warriors. Sarraounia welcomes him with joy. Baka is cheered by Sarraounia's warriors.



Demoralized soldiers At Captain Paul's camp, the deserters who have been caught are punished with lashes. The army is rebuilding, but morale seems to be suffering. Lieutenant Julien notices that the soldiers are no longer motivated.



Sarraounia spots Paul's army Sarraounia's army, hidden in the mountains, sees Captain Paul's army, unsuspecting of the enemy's presence, advance into the valley. Paul's soldiers set up camp in the valley. Sarraounia returns to her village to prepare for war. She promises to decorate her throne with the skins of the white officers. Sarraounia harangues her troops. Sarraounia tells her warriors that no one in history will say that the Aznas were defeated without a fight. She tells her people that she has left them no sons but will leave them a name and honor.



Paul attacks Sarraounia Captain Paul attacks Sarraounia's kingdom. He is surprised by a fierce resistance of rifles, arrows and slingshots. However, Paul's soldiers manage to breach the kingdom's walls with their cannons. Sarraounia and her troops retreat into the dense savannah. Captain Paul's army suffers enormous losses. Sarraounia is nowhere to be found. Paul and his officers enter Sarraounia's chamber. They lay their hands on the queen's silks and jewels. Captain Paul's troops set off in search of Sarraounia in the savannah thickets. Camouflaged in the thicket, Sarraounia asks her warriors to hold on, even if it means eating roots to live. She tells them that they must put up constant resistance and harassment to the whites until the final victory.



Don't shatter the myth of our superiority One of Paul's white officers snatches a mask from the oracle's chamber and wears it to show the hesitant black soldiers that there is nothing mystical to fear from these masks. The officer falls and screams in pain, trying to tear the mask from his face. The doctor rushes to his aid. Paul scolds the officer for shattering the myth of white superiority by losing control in front of the blacks.



The tirailleurs' mutiny More and more people, proud of Sarraounia's resistance, join Sarraounia's troops who have taken refuge in the savannah. Meanwhile, the tirailleurs, exhausted by Paul's military campaign that keeps taking them away from their families and makes them betray their brothers and sisters of the race, begin a mutiny. They



beat Coulibaly, who runs to Captain Paul for help. Paul arrives and the soldiers stand to attention at the sight of him. He threatens to have them shot if he hears any more rumors of mutiny. He tells them that together they have defeated Sarraounia, and that her reputation as a witch is a myth. He promises to share the spoils of Sarraounia's kingdom with them. Paul asks the soldiers to follow him, promising them to have their chests full of medals. But the soldiers are inflexible. They tell Captain Paul that the war is over for them.

Desperate Paul adorns himself with Sarraounia's garments and jewelry to demonstrate to the soldiers how their wives could be dressed as lavishly as the queen of the Lugu kingdom, if they continue to support his military campaign. He pleads with Coulibaly to persuade them, but Coulibaly responds that he has exhausted all his arguments. Frustrated and enraged, Paul dismisses the soldiers, insulting them by calling them weaklings. Paul orders the burning of Sarraounia's kingdom, where he and his troops had previously taken up quarters. After setting the kingdom ablaze, they break camp. The soldiers and porters, utterly exhausted, stumble as they walk, slowing the march's progress. Riding on horseback, Paul moves through the ranks, ruthlessly executing the weaker soldiers. Paul descends into paranoia. A messenger from Colonel Claude arrives with a note instructing Captain Paul to halt all progress and wait for Claude to take command of the mission. Enraged, Paul lashes out, declaring that Colonel Claude can go to hell. He vows not to let anyone rob him of his victory.



The Ambush Paul takes a unit of soldiers and sets out to lay an ambush for Colonel Claude. Upon encountering Paul's troops aiming their weapons at him, Colonel Claude identifies himself and attempts to defuse the situation. Paul, however, warns him to stop or face dire consequences. Despite the colonel's command for his soldiers to remain calm, Paul's paranoia overwhelms him. He orders his soldiers to open fire, resulting in the colonel's death.



Paul dreams of his own empire Bringing Colonel Claude's lifeless body back to camp, he gathers the soldiers. Addressing them, Paul claims that the colonel sought to strip him of his command and seize all the spoils for himself. He declares that neither he nor they are French soldiers anymore. Instead, he rallies them with a vision of unity and ambition, proclaiming that together they will build a magnificent empire.



The Mutiny The African soldiers revolt, rejecting Paul's grand plan for a new adventure. In the turmoil, Coulibaly is killed by a soldier, and a captive woman strikes Julien with her spear, ending his fate. Chaos escalates as the soldiers turn against Captain Paul, riddling him with bullets. He collapses, lifeless.



Sarraounia's Promises As more and more clans rally to her cause, Sarraounia's army of men and women grows steadily. She makes a solemn pledge to her followers, promising that together they will create a society of free individuals, one that honors and respects the diverse beliefs of everyone. The crowd bursts into applause, moved by her vision. To immortalize this historic moment, the griot and the kingdom's musicians capture it in a song.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SARRAOUNIA Sarraounia's legacy is one of resilience, courage, and inclusiveness. She stands as a symbol of strength, fiercely defending her kingdom's sovereignty and cultural heritage. Her ability to inspire unity among diverse groups and her unwavering commitment to freedom highlight her exceptional leadership in the face of adversity.

Independent Sarraounia's commitment to independence is unwavering. When her lover, Baka, displays a desire to dominate her, she decisively dismisses him. Sarraounia vows to protect her autonomy and pledges to her people that she will fight against the French colonizing mission until her final breath.

Determined Sarraounia's determination fuels her relentless struggle for freedom. She refuses to surrender, continuously harassing the invaders in pursuit of ultimate victory. Even when Captain Paul believes he has triumphed over her army, Sarraounia retreats to the savannah and mountains, leveraging her intimate knowledge of the terrain. From these vantage points, she torments the enemy, driving Paul to madness and ultimately causing him to turn against his own soldiers, leading to his downfall.

Tolerant Sarraounia's leadership is defined by her commitment to tolerance and unity. As neighboring tribes rally to her cause, she envisions a society where individuals coexist as equals, respecting one another's beliefs and traditions. Despite the animosity of the Muslim kings toward her, they unanimously acknowledge that Sarraounia has never imposed her animist beliefs on anyone. Her inclusive approach solidifies her reputation as a just and visionary leader.

CAPTAIN PAUL Paul is consumed by violence, intolerance, and paranoia, which define his colonizing mission. Over time, the brutality he unleashes on others appears to turn inward, leaving him convinced that everyone around him is conspiring against him. This descent into mistrust becomes the driving force behind his actions.

Violent Paul enforces brutal rules within his army. He publicly whips soldiers for insubordination, shoots one at close range for wasting ammunition, and allows the slaughter of men, women, and children in conquered villages. He burns what remains of these communities and takes disturbing pleasure in watching his soldiers play gruesome games, such as testing their skill by beheading captives.

Intolerant Paul refuses to accept Sarraounia's animist beliefs or the Islam of the Muslim tribes. For him, there is no middle ground—one must embrace Christianity or face destruction. His campaign is marked by a blind and inflexible crusade against any faith or culture that deviates from his rigid Christian ideals.

Paranoid Paul trusts no one—neither the English, the animists of Sarraounia's kingdom, the Muslims of Sokoto, nor even his own officers. Convinced that everyone is plotting against him to either kill him or steal his glory, Paul becomes unpredictable and erratic. His paranoia silences his white officers, who no longer dare to express their opinions in his presence, fearing his wrath.

THE BLACK SOLDIERS The black soldiers are depicted as individuals struggling with a deep-seated abandonment neurosis, which fuels their fascination with the French ideal. This condition drives them to despise their own race for insignificant reasons. However, their disillusionment grows as they come to realize that the very violence they once supported is gradually turning against them, breaking the hold of their internalized conflict.

Violent Captain Paul is a man consumed by violence, instilling his barbaric tendencies into his soldiers. Under his influence, the black soldiers mirror his brutality, burning black villages, killing black populations, and abducting and assaulting black women. They fail to recognize that the cruelty they inflict on others is also being directed at them. This realization only dawns on them when Paul makes them experience the violence in a direct and tangible way.

Indecisive The black soldiers of the French army are portrayed as deeply indecisive, struggling to make choices that align with their well-being. Torn between their allegiance to France—instilled in them through the colonizing mission—and their attachment to their families and native lands, they find themselves caught in a painful conflict. By the time they achieve true awareness and rise in rebellion against Paul, the damage they have inflicted upon Africa is both irreparable and indefensible. Their journey reflects the tragic consequences of their internal struggle.

Abandonment neurotic The African soldiers hesitated for so long before rebelling because they feared being abandoned by France, which had been presented to them as the ultimate ideal to strive toward. It took a shocking turn of events to break them out of their condition as abandonment neurotics. This wake-up call came in the form of Paul's sudden shift—no longer targeting only enemy tribes but also ruthlessly eliminating weakened soldiers from his own ranks. The soldiers realized that at any moment, they could become one of his victims, forcing them to confront the brutal reality of their situation.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Gender

Feminism Africa has often been portrayed as the continent of women's subjugation. Undeniably, African women remain the most disadvantaged groups in terms of access to education, health care, private property and credit. As a result, African women all too often find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder and the most affected by poverty. To try to see in the exploits of the great women of pre-colonial African history, such as Anne Zingha, queen of Ndongo and Matamba (modern-day Angola), the Amazonian women soldiers of Benin, or Sarraounia, queen of the Lugu kingdom, any proof of the non-existence of discrimination against women in Africa would be, if not naïve, at least intellectually dishonest. On the other hand, Africa had its feminists before the term was coined, long before it had the same meaning as in the works of Olympe de Gouges, George Sand or Simone de Beauvoir. With *Sarraounia*, Med Hondo celebrates pre-colonial African feminism, which is not to be confused with the absence of discrimination against women.

Illustrative moment: Sarraounia stands as both a queen and a warrior in a world governed by patriarchal norms. Through her story, Med Hondo spotlights the critical role of women—not just in the social fabric of precolonial Africa but also in the fight against colonial oppression. Sarraounia confronts her lover, Baka, who resents the praise sung about her by the *griot* (singer and historian) of the kingdom, longing instead to be the focal point. Though she acknowledges Baka's skills as a warrior, she firmly asserts her status as queen and demands his respect. This decisive act symbolizes her rejection of patriarchal dominance and the submission of women to men. In her army, women are just as integral as men, defying traditional gender roles. Even the women captured by the colonial forces refuse to bow to their oppressors and secretly plot to aid Sarraounia's cause. Their opportunity arises when a storm devastates the French camp—a disaster attributed to Sarraounia's supernatural powers by the black soldiers. Amid the chaos, the captives escape and join Sarraounia's resistance, bolstering her forces as Captain Paul's campaign falters. As a female leader, Sarraounia becomes the unifying force rallying Africans against colonization.



Dehumanization/objectification Colonization is inherently violent, an act of occupation and domination where a powerful nation subjugates a weaker nation. Far from preserving humanity, it erodes it—stripping individuals of dignity and reducing them to beasts or objects. In the dynamics of colonization, both the victims and the oppressors undergo this transformation. Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* highlights the savage nature of colonial powers as they seek to conquer Africa. The conquerors, driven by an insatiable impulse for dominance, inflict the worst acts of violence and humiliation upon those they subjugate, losing their own humanity in the process. The weapons they wield, aimed at their victims and fired without hesitation, become more than tools—they become extensions of the oppressors themselves, transforming them into mindless killing machines devoid of compassion or conscience. Paradoxically, the oppressors mirror the condition of their victims. While they dehumanize their victims, treating them as creatures to be subdued or objects to be manipulated, they simultaneously descend into a comparable state of savagery. This profound irony underscores the lesson of the film, which examines the reciprocal dehumanization and objectification inherent in the colonial enterprise.

Illustrative moments: During Captain Paul's colonial conquest, women particularly are treated as mere objects of exchange in this context, subjected to abduction, sale, and violation at the whim of the victors. Soldiers in the French army, both black and white, claim the women from conquered villages as spoils of war, equating them to livestock or material goods to be used and traded at will. Dehumanized and commodified, these individuals are reduced to war trophies, devalued as if they were merchandise. After each raid, Coulibaly, the black assistant to Captain Paul, distributes women to the soldiers alongside cattle and grain. Tiémogo, a soldier who mourns the loss of his captive "wife", is reassured by Paul, who promises to buy him another woman. The treatment of conquered men and women as animals and objects reflects the inhumanity of their oppressors—the auxiliaries of the colonial army and the French architects of the colonial conquest. These perpetrators have cast aside their humanity, descending into monstrosity and embracing savagery as a mode of domination.



Religion In the colonial era, wars were not merely tribal, driven by the ethnic ties of the combatants, but also deeply influenced by religion. Conflicts unfolded between African Muslims and African animists, as well as between these groups and French Catholics. Alliances shifted among these three religious factions based on strategic interests. Animism posed the greatest challenge to French colonizers, as it served as a powerful symbol of resistance for communities under colonial rule. For those who sought to dominate Africa—whether Muslim or Christian—it was crucial to undermine its ancestral beliefs. By severing these spiritual ties, the colonizers aimed to leave Africans disoriented and susceptible to their control.

Illustrative moments: The kingdom of Lugu, ruled by Queen Sarraounia, has long been targeted by the Muslims of the Sokoto Caliphate, who aim to convert its people, whom they deem impious. However, the formidable army of Sarraounia consistently repels these assaults. Yet, Sarraounia's adversaries extend beyond the Muslims. The French colonial army also sets its sights on her kingdom, seeking to "pacify" it and liberate it from what it sees as the "obscurantism" of animism. For the Muslims, this presents an opportunity to rid themselves of Sarraounia, whose mysticism, they claim, has often defeated and humiliated them. Thus, some Muslims choose to collaborate with the French army, while others resign themselves to leaving Sarraounia to face her fate at the hands of the French and the will of Allah. However, the alliance between the Muslims and the French proves fragile. Captain Paul spares no one, including the Muslims, in his unrelenting pursuit of conquest. His campaign advances against Muslim kingdoms as well, leading some frustrated Muslim leaders to set aside their spiritual differences with Sarraounia. They unite with her to stand against the French invasion, intensifying the challenges faced by Paul's army.



Myth The colonial encounter was also a clash of myths. To the West, the darker complexion of Africans symbolized an enigmatic and impenetrable land, shrouded in mystery along with its inhabitants. Determined to unravel this enigma, the West countered it with its own myth, the ideology of racial superiority. African animist beliefs were challenged by white deities, embodied by European explorers portrayed as demigods. Figures like Stanley used tricks to awe and manipulate African leaders, such as concealing batteries in handshakes to give mild shocks or using magnifying glasses to ignite flames. These performances aimed to mystify and coerce African chiefs into signing land cession agreements they did not fully comprehend. Beneath the assurance of their kings' and queens' protection, rooted in traditional beliefs, African communities were ultimately compelled to accept the constructed semi-divinity of the white man.

Illustrative moment: Sarraounia, the queen of the Lugu kingdom, is an animist queen. Her kingdom has resisted several Muslim attacks, and her defeated enemies are convinced that the strength of Sarraounia's army comes from the queen's mystical powers. To her enemies, Sarraounia is a powerful and malevolent witch. As rumors



of Sarraounia's powers spread, the scouts and porters who are supposed to guide Captain Paul's army to Sarraounia's kingdom refuse to cooperate. Even Captain Paul's black soldiers hesitate to confront Sarraounia's army. Paul tries to convince them through force—whipping them publicly—or by making them believe in the myth of the White man's semi-divinity. One of Paul's White officers jeopardizes the myth of the White man's divinity when, wanting to prove Sarraounia's impotence, he seizes and wears one of the queen's masks, only to be mysteriously struck down, crying and writhing in pain. While the army's doctor tends to the unfortunate man, Paul becomes angry and reprimands him for his lack of self-control, which discredits the White man in front of the black soldiers and undermines France's colonizing mission.

Technology: *Pharmacopoeia* African pharmacopoeia, with its deep roots in centuries-old traditions, continues to flourish in open markets across the continent. These lively sections showcase a wealth of remedies and antidotes sourced from animals, plants, and minerals. For many African communities, these "traditional pharmacies" remain indispensable, offering time-honored medicinal solutions steeped in indigenous wisdom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while the world grappled with delayed and inequitable vaccine rollouts, many African populations turned to these traditional practices for relief. In West Africa, for example, the *kinkeliba* tree (*Combretum micranthum*) gained prominence, as its leaves and bark were brewed into infusions believed to possess healing properties. This enduring reliance on African pharmacopoeia highlights the resilience of traditional knowledge and its ability to adapt in the face of modern challenges.

Illustrative moment: The secrets of African pharmacopoeia are passed down through great masters to initiates, granting these masters the revered status of "sorcerers." Sarraounia learns the healing properties of traditional herbs, roots, and barks from her mentor, Dawa. Alongside this, Dawa teaches her the art of crafting deadly poisons for her warriors' arrows and preparing antidotes to counteract the toxins used by her enemies. These teachings transform Sarraounia's soldiers into a formidable force, capable of repelling repeated assaults by Muslim adversaries against the Lugu kingdom. Her enemies attribute the strength of her army to the malevolent powers of the animist gods she worships. This perception cements Sarraounia's reputation as the "witch queen," a fearsome title that spreads beyond her immediate foes. When her legend reaches the French colonial army, it strikes terror into the hearts of its black soldiers, who refuse to confront her in battle. Captain Paul resolves to whipping and threatening his recalcitrant soldiers with death to make them advance into Sarraounia's territory.

POLITICS

Leadership: Africa, as Med Hondo critiques, finds itself in a state of decline largely due to the incompetence of its leaders. These leaders, often remnants of colonial administrations, heirs to such legacies, or puppets installed by European governments through fraudulent elections, fail to serve the interests of Africa. Their power, secured by their Western patrons, aligns them with the priorities of these foreign powers rather than with the needs of their own people. For their citizens, these leaders demonstrate a blatant neglect of responsibility. Worse still, they often rule as violent dictators, governing with absolute control and disregarding democratic principles. Hondo condemns these outdated figures, imposed upon Africa by former colonial powers, as obstacles to the continent's progress and self-determination.

Illustrative moment: Tiémogo, a black *tirailleur*, slit the throat of a soldier he accused of stealing his Fulani captive and sleeping with her. Tiémogo's victim has lost a lot of blood, but the doctor says he can save him. Tiémogo only wants one thing: to finish off his victim. The captain tries to calm him down and tells the lieutenant that Tiémogo is a brave soldier, loyal to France. The captain says he will make Tiémogo chief of one of the conquered villages, so that he can watch over France's interests. Perhaps Tiémogo will be a good administrator for France. For Africa, however, Tiémogo will be a disaster. He is the archetype of African leadership promoted by France. He is obtuse, violent and intolerant. This kind of ignorant handpicked leadership has contributed and continues to contribute to the ongoing disorganization of Africa. The paradigm of arming and maintaining in power puppets in the service of France is still very much alive, especially in West Africa.

Colonization

Colonial violence Colonization, wrote Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), is a process of savagery for both the colonizer and the colonized. History offers countless examples to affirm this truth. In Algeria, the resistance of local fighters to French conquest was often labeled as terrorism. Yet, as Frantz Fanon argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), this was a response to colonial violence, as only greater violence could dismantle the colonial system. The scale of colonial savagery is epitomized by Marshal Thomas Bugeaud, a prominent figure in France's conquest of Algeria. His troops displayed necklaces made of severed Arab ears, turning human suffering into grotesque trophies. The French colonial army escalated its cruelty with portable generators, used to electrocute prisoners through their genitals, followed by the violation of their wives—a calculated act of humiliation and domination. These atrocities were not random acts of depraved individuals, but deliberate strategies engineered for conquest and subjugation.

Illustrative moments: The black soldiers serving France are transformed into instruments of destruction, unleashing terror on the African ethnic groups targeted by France's colonial campaigns. Their military operations leave villages in ruins—homes and granaries burned, livestock seized, women abducted and raped, children and men slaughtered. Resistance fighters, when captured, face unspeakable cruelty: buried upright to their necks, they become targets in macabre games where soldiers slice their throats while riding their horses. The white officers who command these atrocities embody an even deeper savagery. They revel in the violence, demanding severed hands as proof of cartridges used, reducing human lives to mere accounting. Captain Paul exemplifies this descent into barbarity, executing a soldier at point-blank range for failing to justify his use of ammunition. As the campaign progresses, the relentless brutality begins to unravel Paul's sanity. He becomes unhinged, turning against his own officers and headquarters, whose concerns about his sadistic methods grow. Colonization, in its essence, dehumanizes everyone it touches—Paul, as a symbol of France, and the soldiers under his command, all consumed by the savage logic of conquest and domination.



Racism Racism and a sense of superiority formed the foundation of colonial ideology. Colonial France, as French Prime Minister Jules Ferry declared in 1885 in the National Assembly, saw the white man as a member of the "superior race" tasked with a moral duty to "enlighten" the so-called "inferior races" of Africa by bringing them civilization and French values. With this conviction of their own righteousness, France dispatched its sons to distant lands, charged with expanding the empire through conquest. On the ground, these emissaries of France perpetuated the racist narratives they had absorbed in the metropole. They wove these beliefs into their conversations and drew upon them for the courage needed to carry out their "pacification expeditions"—missions that proved far harsher and more grueling than their leaders had led them to expect.

Illustrative moment: After a successful campaign of raids on targeted villages, French army soldiers claim their spoils of war - captive women to be used as sex slaves. Captain Paul claims his own captive, a black woman, whom he uses for his pleasure but refuses to acknowledge as worthy of sharing his bed. After each encounter, she is cast aside, left to sleep on the floor beside him. In their spare time, the French officers tell each other stories about the bestiality of blacks and the sexual impetuosity of black women. One of them tells his peers that he witnessed a scene in which a black woman, positioned on a table, was taken from behind by a horse. The army doctor, who has yet to have an affair with black women, is titillated by these fables; he dreams of discovering the mystery spoken of by his compatriots, and observes a black woman from afar, who understands his interest in her. But when she offers herself to him, he replies that he "can't". His racial superiority forbids it.



Divide and conquer Pre-colonial Africa experienced intense inter-tribal conflicts fueled by ethnic and ideological differences. During the colonial era, these conflicts were exploited by European powers, who accelerated their colonizing efforts by exacerbating tensions and capitalizing on them. This strategy epitomized the concept of "divide and conquer." For example, colonial armies deployed black soldiers not

to their home regions but to areas inhabited by rival tribes. These soldiers carried not only the weapons provided by colonial authorities but also deep-seated cultural animosities toward their assigned targets. With the advantage of military power, they often subjected these communities to severe oppression. Ultimately, inter-tribal hostility and prejudice served as a foundation for colonial domination.

Illustrative moment: Captain Paul's soldiers, predominantly from Sudan, lament their separation from their distant homeland and families as they advance toward West African kingdoms. This deliberate separation is part of the colonial army's calculated strategy. French war engineers seek to strip colonial soldiers of empathy for their victims by deploying them to unfamiliar regions inhabited by people with whom they share no cultural or ethnic ties. Combined with the frustration of being far from their families, this alienation fosters mercilessness among the soldiers, reinforcing France's doctrine of "divide and conquer." The Paul Voulet-Julien Chanoine expedition, remembered as one of France's most disgraceful undertakings due to its acts of rape, massacres, and depravity, exemplifies this strategy. Yet it is far from an isolated incident—it is a direct reflection of France's broader approach to colonial conquest.

APPEARANCE

Duplicity When in January 2025 the political authorities of Senegal, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso ordered the French army to leave their countries, French President Emmanuel Macron lost control of his anger. In front of an audience of journalists, he called the Africans ungrateful and ill-mannered. For Macron, Africans, rather than getting rid of France, should be grateful for France's presence, without which their lives would be unbearable. For many Africans, however, Macron is cynical in thinking of France in Africa as a philanthropist to be thanked for its benevolence. The history of France-Africa relations proves these skeptics right. Whenever France has given with its left hand, it has taken back with its right a hundredfold. In Africa, France appropriates countries' wealth by force. It exploits, pollutes, starves and kills the populations with impunity. In French-speaking Africa, France has always been an oppressor and predator who deserves no praise from Africans.

Illustrative moment: "France is our mother, she's the one who feeds us, with her potatoes and her macaroni. When war comes, we are her proud soldiers ... always courageous." This is the song that punctuates the march of the African tirailleurs on military campaign for France. If the last sentence of this song is indisputable, the first sentence, on the other hand, is totally false. Yes, France has always been able to count on the courage of its African infantrymen in times of war. 140,000 African soldiers enlisted in the French forces during the First World War, and 400,000 Africans during the Second World War were enlisted on France's behalf. On top of this, Africans were forced to supply not only the French army, but also the French population with grain, oil, rubber, nuts and more. The Africans' war efforts for France put Africa on the knife's edge of famine and sparked revolts in Africa, which France put down in bloodshed. No, France does not feed Africa. Rather, Africa has always been France's granary. And it is the result of this fact that today leaves Africa poor. It is highly duplicitous for the French colonial army to have its African soldiers sing this song.

Discussion Questions

1. On what values does Queen Sarraounia's leadership rest?
2. How does Sarraounia's leadership reflect the themes of independence and resistance against colonialism?
3. How does cultural identity shape the characters' actions and motivations in the film?
4. In what ways is the film characteristic of the tension between traditional African and European ideals?
5. The film starts and ends with the presence of the *griot*. For what purpose does the filmmaker use this motif?
6. In what ways does Sarraounia's resistance symbolize broader struggles against oppression and intolerance?