

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Tilai/The Law (1990) Idrissa Ouédraogo (1954-2018)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Idrissa Ouédraogo was a Burkinabé filmmaker whose work critically examined the interplay between tradition and modernity within his country's evolving social landscape. Born on January 21, 1954, in Banfora, Burkina Faso, and raised in Ouahigouya, a northern town, he was the son of farmers. His rural upbringing profoundly shaped his artistic sensibilities, influencing his portrayal of social hierarchy, communal life, and cultural transformation in Burkinabé society. Ouédraogo pursued film studies in Ouagadougou, Kyiv, and Paris, culminating in his graduation from the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) in 1985. His cinematic work offers nuanced explorations of identity, tradition, and societal change, frequently challenging established norms. His filmography includes *Yam Daabo* (*The Choice*, 1987), *Yaaba* (*Grandmother*, 1989), *Tilai* (*The Law*, 1990), *Karim and Sala* (1991), *Samba Traoré* (1993), *Le Cri du cœur* (*The Heart's Cry*, 1994), *Kini and Adams* (1997), *La Colère des dieux* (*Anger of the Gods*, 2003), and *Kato Kato* (2006).

Film Tilai (*The Law*) is an 81-minute drama that unfolds within the framework of Mossi cultural tradition. *Tilai* explores the devastating consequences of rigid customs, the conflict between personal desire and communal duty, and the tragic cost of upholding honor at the expense of humanity. *Tilai* received widespread international acclaim, earning the Jury Grand Prize at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival and the Grand Prize at the 1991 Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO).

Background *Tilai* was filmed in rural settings in Burkina Faso that the filmmaker chose for their likeness to precolonial landscape. The actors are local actors familiar with Burkina Faso traditions. The film was celebrated for its authentic portrayal of Mossi ethnic traditions and its use of the Mooré language.

MAIN CHARACTERS

SAGA (Rasmané Ouedraogo) A man who returns home after a long absence to find out that his fiancée has been married to his father

NOGMA (Ina Cissé) Saga's former fiancée, now married to his father

KOUGRI (Assane Ouedraogo) Saga's brother, tasked with executing him to restore family honor

KUILGA (Roukietou Barry) Nogma's younger sister who plays the role of a go-between during Saga and Nogma's secret encounters

SYNOPSIS

Tilai (*The Law*) is a tale of love, honor, and the devastating grip of tradition in a rural Burkina Faso village. Saga, a young man, returns home after a long absence to a shocking revelation: his father has married Nogma, the woman once promised to himself. This act, sanctioned by custom, transforms Nogma into Saga's stepmother, rendering their love forbidden. Refusing to accept this betrayal, Saga withdraws from the village, building a hut in self-imposed exile. He and Nogma rekindle their relationship in secret, defying the patriarchal order. When their affair is discovered, Saga is sentenced to death to restore familial honor, and his brother Kougri is chosen to carry out the execution. Torn between loyalty and

compassion, Kougri spares Saga, allowing the couple to flee. Their escape offers a brief reprieve, but Saga returns after his mother's death, exposing Kougri's deception. The revelation leads to Kougri's banishment, and, in a final act of despair, he kills Saga to uphold tradition. Burdened by guilt, Kougri walks into exile, leaving behind a fractured family and a legacy of sorrow.

SCENES

Saga's homecoming After a long absence from his village, Saga returns home. Riding a donkey, he crosses a sun-scorched landscape. He arrives at the edge of a cliff overlooking the village. Dismounting, he walks to the cliff's edge and gazes down at the cluster of huts below, his joy plainly visible. Blowing into his horn, Saga calls out to the village. Below, the villagers pause, visibly stirred by the sound. Their eyes lift, drawn instinctively toward the source of his call. Nogma, Saga's fiancée, and Kougri, his brother, recognize the sound of the horn. They race towards it, halting suddenly with their gaze locked in the direction of the call. Kougri tells Nogma not to worry. He assures her that Saga will understand. The village gathers and begins marching toward Saga



Kougri lies to Saga Saga comes down the slope, heading towards Kougri, who has gone ahead of the villagers. Kougri greets him and remarks that he has been away for a long time. Saga replies that it has indeed been a long time, and he asks his brother to tell him what has happened in the village during his absence. Kougri tells his brother that nothing happened and turns away from him. Saga grabs Kougri and says he does not believe him. Nogma rushes toward Saga, but she is held back by Saga's father (now her husband). Kulga, Nogma's younger sister, casts a disdainful look at the adults and declares, 'All of this is your fault.' Saga presses Kougri to tell him the truth. After a moment's hesitation, Kougri finally says, 'It's Nogma ... Father married her. She's now our mother.' Saga protests, saying that Nogma was promised to him. Kougri replies that their father changed his mind, that it was his right, and that Nogma is now his wife. Saga accuses Kougri of betraying him alongside their father and walks away



Kougri is torn Sitting in the clearing, Saga is visibly lost in thought. Back in the village, Nogma, looking sorrowful, gazes at the rocky horizon where Saga had stood moments earlier. Kougri comes to join her. She confides in him that she hopes Saga will return, because she does not love his father. Kougri replies that he knows, and that he himself is torn between loyalty to his father and love for his brother.



Saga's self-exile Saga spots an abandoned hut and decides to repair it. At night, while the village sleeps, he goes to knock on his mother's door. He tells her this decision is made, and that he will not live in the village. He promises they will see each other again. On his way back, Saga hears Nogma singing sadly from his father's hut as she massages the sleeping old man. He pauses for a moment to listen. Just as he's about to leave, the door creaks open and Nogma calls out to him. Saga walks away without responding. Kougri's mother stops him and says that Saga came to visit her during the night. She reveals that he no longer wishes to live in their father's house and adds that their father is still unaware of Saga's decision. On his way to visit his brother, Kougri is stopped by their father, who instructs him to tell Saga that he must return home. Kougri finds Saga putting the final touches on his hut and delivers the message. Tension escalates between the two brothers, culminating in a quarrel, as Saga accuses Kougri of siding with their father.



Kuilga wants to understand Kuilga, Nogma's younger sister, asks their mother to tell her about Nogma's life and situation. The mother responds that Nogma will eventually grow to love her husband, just as she herself came to love Nogma's father, and that's simply how life is. Kuilga casts a look of disgust toward her father as he passes by. Kuilga is going to fetch water with her older sister, Nogma. As they walk along a winding path, she points out a small hut in a clearing and tells Nogma that Saga lives there. When Nogma asks how she knows, Kuilga explains that it's a well-known secret in the village. A moment later, Saga comes out of the hut, and Kuilga smiles, saying that there he is. Nogma smiles at him. Kuilga asks Nogma if she still loves Saga. Nogma calls her impertinent for asking such a question but then asks her to keep their meeting with Saga a secret. Kuilga assures her that she can count on her for that.



He will come to his senses Kougri visits Tenga, Nogma's father, and informs him that Saga has decided not to live in the village anymore. He adds that Saga accuses Tenga of treachery for agreeing to give Nogma to his own father as a wife, despite knowing she had been promised to Saga. Tenga responds that Saga will come to his senses in time.



The little go-between Little Kuilga gleefully serves as the go-between for her sister and Saga. She teases her sister, pointing out the extra flair in her look ever since Saga came back. Nogma, clearly pleased, acts offended, but her amused expression betrays her.



Saga proposes they elope Saga continues to reproach Nogma for agreeing to marry his father. He accuses her of betrayal. Nogma, with visible sorrow, insists she had no choice, and she confesses she still loves him. Saga asks Nogma to run away with him. Her face darkens as she refuses, saying she cannot abandon her parents. Frustrated, Saga walks away, telling her that she knows where to find him when she is ready to live by his side. In the days that follow, Nogma passes by his hut without stopping.



Nogma returns to Saga's One evening, Nogma asks her younger sister to carry the water jar and wait for her. While Nogma slips away to visit Saga in his hut, the little girl remains under a tree, waiting as night descends around her. Nogma shares a moment with Saga. She tells him how much she missed him, how happy she feels by his side, and how she wishes they could live together. But she admits that this dream is impossible. Visibly upset, Saga asks why she gives her parents more importance than their love. Nogma replies that it is all his fault, and that he was gone too long, and that his two years of absence gave others the time to decide her fate. Saga concedes that she is right. Then he adds that throughout his time away, she never left his thoughts.

The whole village is waiting Nogma steps out of Saga's hut smiling, just as her younger sister Kuilga rushes to meet her. Kuilga, clearly irritated, scolds her for having made her wait so long. The two sisters head home together, and Kuilga warns that their parents are waiting, and that it is going to be tense. But it is not just their parents. The whole village is waiting for them.



Fathers and Mothers Nogma's father demands an explanation. Kuilga delivers the story she and her sister have rehearsed: they had lingered at their aunt's home in the neighboring village. Clearly appeased, Tenga, their father, turns to Nogma's elderly husband and assures him there was nothing to worry about. But the old man, wagging his finger at Nogma, warns that he does not want this to happen again. Saga's father confides in Saga's mother that their son's refusal to return to the village saddens and dishonors him. She urges him to forgive their son, but he replies that it is Saga who must take the first step and ask for



forgiveness. Nogma and her younger sister Kuilga continue to deceive their parents, pretending they are off to visit their aunt. In truth, Nogma slips away to meet her Saga. Meanwhile, their mother grows increasingly exasperated, lamenting to her husband that Kuilga no longer listens to her. He responds coldly, "If you want obedience, perhaps you should learn to raise her properly."

Nogma's secret is discovered A man from the village uncovers the sisters' lie and reports it to the community. Kuilga is punished by her father. Nogma's father accuses her of bringing shame upon him and blames her mother for raising her poorly. Fearing that Nogma might warn Saga of what awaits him, the village men restrain and tie her up. Kuilga finds Kougri deep in meditation. She tells him that the treatment inflicted on her sister is unjust and asks what he thinks of it. Kougri acknowledges that Nogma is indeed suffering an injustice, but adds that nothing can be done, for it is her fate. Kuilga retorts that he's just as foolish as the rest of the men in the village.



Tenga hangs himself The men of the village gather to vote on Saga's fate. Their verdict: Saga must die. His brother Kougri is chosen to carry out the sentence. Kougri protests, arguing that Saga is his own brother, but the village elders, including his father, remind him firmly that this is his duty. Armed with his knife and accompanied by men carrying torches, Kougri makes his way to his brother's hut. As they travel through the darkened path, the group halts. They see Nogma's father preparing to hang himself from a tree, stunned by the sight of a lifeless body hanging from a tree. Kougri remarks that Tenga is about to hang himself. One of the men demands that Tenga be left alone to assuage his dishonor, and they continue on towards Saga's hut.

Kougri spares Saga In front of his brother's hut, Kougri asks the men to wait outside and enters alone. Inside, he explains the danger that looms to Saga and urges him to escape through a hole at the back of the hut and never return to the village. Saga thanks Kougri, promises he will, and escapes through the hole. Kougri emerges from the hut, clutching a knife slick with his own blood from a wound he inflicted upon himself. He announces that he has just killed his brother and demands the hut be set ablaze. Then, followed by the other men, Kougri returns to the village. Kougri and the other men return to the village. He presents the bloodied knife to his father as proof of Saga's death. Saga's father examines the blade, then passes it to an elder, who inspects it with equal care. Finally, the knife is handed back to Kougri, who uses it to cut the ropes binding Nogma, setting her free.



Fractured bonds The men of the village bury Nogma's father in the cemetery, with the entire village in attendance. Nogma's mother curses her daughter, blaming her for making her a widow. Kuilga pleads with her mother to forgive Nogma, reminding her that despite the loss of her husband, Nogma is still her child. But the mother remains resolute. She tells Nogma she never wants to see her again.



Saga arrives at his aunt's After a long and obstacle-filled journey, Saga arrives at his aunt's home in a distant village. She welcomes him with visible joy. Saga does not tell her what has happened. He only tells her that he will no longer return to his village. She asks no further questions.

Nogma learns that Saga is alive As Nogma bows before her father's grave, Kougri and his mother arrive. The mother urges her son to tell Nogma the full truth. Kougri then reveals to Nogma that Saga is still alive, and that he never killed him. That very night, Nogma gathers her belongings and slips away from the village, aided by Saga's mother who keeps watch.



Saga finds Nogma After journeying for days through the desert, Nogma eventually collapses from exhaustion. During a hunting trip, Saga comes across her unconscious body and carries her back to his aunt's village. Together, Saga and his aunt care for Nogma, nursing her back to health. When she finally awakens, Saga introduces her to his aunt as "his wife." His aunt welcomes Nogma with radiant joy.



"We all acted foolishly!" The village sends horsemen in search of Nogma, but their efforts prove fruitless. In every village they pass through, the locals deliberately mislead them, pointing them down false trails. The horsemen return empty-handed, to the great delight of Kougri and Kuilga. In a moment of candor, Kougri confesses to Kuilga that his conscience weighs heavily on him, and that everyone acted foolishly.

A happy life Saga builds a hut for himself and Nogma in his aunt's village. One day, Nogma shares joyful news: she's pregnant. Saga and his aunt greet the announcement with happiness. Later, while Nogma and Saga's aunt are out fetching water, a messenger arrives and delivers troubling news: Saga's mother, the aunt's sister, is gravely ill. Without waiting for Nogma and his aunt to return, Saga rushes off toward his mother's village.



Surprise to anger Saga arrives atop the cliff overlooking his village, announcing his return with the blast of his horn. But his mother has already passed away, and the villagers, carrying her body to the cemetery, are thrown into a panic. Believing they are seeing the ghost of Saga, they cry out in fear. When Saga approaches his mother's body and asks to see her, the villagers slowly regain their composure. Their terror turns into stunned disbelief, then into anger.



Kougri feels betrayed and kills Saga Kougri approaches his brother and reminds him of the promise he once made, to never show himself in the village again. Saga asks for forgiveness and leans over his mother's lifeless body. Kougri's father steps in, forbidding Saga from touching her, but Saga pays him no attention. The old man approaches Kougri, his face stern with anger, and tells him that everything is his fault—that he is banished from the village. Without a word, Kougri grabs Saga's rifle, which had been laid on the ground when Saga knelt beside their mother's body. Kougri fires at his brother, killing him. Then, in silence, he turns and walks toward the edge of the village.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SAGA Saga is a quiet rebel who challenges tradition through silence and deliberate action. Guided by unwavering principles and deep emotional loyalty, he remains tethered to his homeland even as he defies its expectations. His life is a delicate balance between love and law, integrity and sacrifice.

Defiant Saga confronts the entrenched traditions of his community by quietly rejecting his father's marriage to Nogma. His defiance speaks not through words, but through action: building a solitary hut on the outskirts of the village, he unsettles the communal order with a silent yet forceful expression of disapproval.

Rooted Even in exile, Saga's bond to his homeland endures. By constructing his hut on the village's edge, he embodies a quiet tension between distance and desire. His nearness serves as a poignant gesture, an emotional tether to tradition, kinship, and identity, even as he resists their constraints.

Principled Saga's choices reflect an unwavering moral code that stands at odds with the expectations of his community. Rather than yield to tradition, he remains true to his principles, embracing integrity over compliance, even when it exacts a tragic price and culminates in his death.

Loyal Saga's emotional loyalty to Nogma remains resolute. Recognizing that her marriage to his father was imposed, he forgives her and rekindles their romantic bond. His unwavering devotion, sustained through exile and peril, reveals a heart governed more by love than by law.

NOGMA Nogma navigates the tension between duty and desire with quiet strength, enduring rejection and shame with unyielding resilience. Though cast aside by her family and society, she remains emotionally brave, choosing love over obedience. Her determined heart refuses to waver, pursuing devotion with courageous defiance against tradition.

Conflicted Nogma is torn between duty and desire. Her forced marriage to Kougri's father places her in a role she never chose, and her continued love for Saga reveals the emotional turmoil beneath her composed exterior.

Resilient Despite being disowned by her mother and shamed by her community, Nogma endures. Her strength lies not in rebellion, but in her quiet persistence, choosing love and survival over submission.

Courageous Nogma risks everything to maintain her bond with Saga. Her decision to defy societal norms and pursue a forbidden relationship is an act of emotional bravery, especially in a culture where honor and obedience are paramount.

Determined Nogma does not waver once she chooses Saga. Whether sneaking away to his hut or fleeing the village, Nogma's actions reflect a woman who, despite the odds, follows her heart with unwavering resolve.

KOUGRI Kougri embodies the torment of a man caught between heart and heritage. His loyalty drives him toward a code of honor that ultimately shatters his peace. Bound by duty but undone by grief, his tragic descent reveals the cost of choosing tradition over emotional truth.

Conflicted Kougri is deeply torn between familial love and the rigid demands of tradition. Tasked with killing his own brother to restore honor, he initially spares Saga, revealing the emotional torment beneath his outward obedience.

Loyal Kougri's loyalty to family is profound, even when it leads him into impossible choices. Though he defies his father's command at first, Kougri ultimately sacrifices his own peace to uphold what he believes is expected of him.

Burdened Kougri internalizes the village's code of honor, allowing it to dictate his actions. His eventual decision to kill Saga stems not from hatred, but from an overwhelming sense of obligation and shame.

KUILGA Kuilga embodies a gentle defiance born from youthful curiosity and genuine compassion; her seemingly innocent gestures carry emotional weight, subtly unraveling the social fabric around her.

Inquisitive Kuilga stumbles upon Saga's secluded hut on the village's edge and innocently shares the discovery with Nogma, unknowingly setting their reunion in motion. Her curiosity, born of youthful openness, quietly disrupts the strict conventions that govern their world.

Well-Intentioned Though unaware of the consequences, Kuilga acts out of care and empathy. Her decision to bring Nogma to Saga is driven by kindness, not rebellion. Her actions, though well-intentioned, lead to tragedy.

Disruptive While Kuilga does not confront tradition overtly, she pointedly tells Kougri that he is as foolish as the rest of the men, a remark that hints at her quiet disillusionment. Her seemingly innocent actions gently destabilize the existing order; by orchestrating the forbidden meeting between Saga and Nogma, she emerges as an unassuming catalyst for change.

THEMES

Social death Social death refers to a state in which an individual is effectively erased from the social and moral life of their community, excluded from recognition, participation, and belonging. Unlike physical death, social death is marked by isolation and invisibility: the person remains alive but is treated as though they no longer exist. In many traditional societies, identity is inseparable from communal ties, rituals, and shared responsibilities. To be severed from these structures is to lose not only one's social standing but also one's sense of self. Social death often results from exile, dishonor, or the transgression of deeply rooted cultural norms, and its consequences can be as devastating as physical punishment. It is a form of symbolic annihilation that denies the individual access to the emotional and ethical bonds that define communal life. This condition is vividly portrayed in the film, where the protagonist's estrangement from his village marks the beginning of his symbolic death.

Illustrative moments: When Saga returns from a long journey and discovers that his beloved Nogma has been forced to marry his father, Saga rebels and, in a sense, severs himself from his village community. He builds a hut on the outskirts of the village and withdraws from all communal activities, elements that are essential to belonging and identity in traditional society. Later, when his death sentence is pronounced, Saga deepens his exile by faking his own death and settling in a village far from home. However, upon the death of his mother, Saga, who has remained emotionally tied to his community, returns to the village. This time, however, Saga's fate is sealed: his death is carried out by his own brother, who had been tasked with executing the original sentence.



Repression/oppression In many traditional societies, customs and moral codes are intended to preserve social harmony and collective identity. However, when these traditions become rigid and unquestionable, they often serve as instruments of repression. Rather than adapting to the complexities of human relationships and emotions, such systems enforce conformity through shame, exclusion, and even violence. Individual desires, especially those that challenge patriarchal authority or inherited norms, are treated not as personal matters but as threats to communal stability. In this context, tradition becomes less about shared values and more about control, silencing dissent and punishing deviation. The cost of upholding such an order is often the sacrifice of empathy, justice, and personal freedom. This dynamic is illustrated in *Tilai*, where the protagonist's refusal to submit to an unjust tradition sets him on a tragic path of exile, condemnation, and ultimately, death.

Illustrative moments: Saga endures his community's repression for expressing his opposition to his fiancée being married to his father. Saga's opposition to his father's marriage with Nogma is not treated as a personal grievance but as a violation of the village's social order. As a result, the community responds not with empathy or dialogue, but with condemnation and exile. Saga withdraws to the outskirts of the village, symbolically severing ties with the society that has betrayed him and whose laws he finds oppressive. When he deepens his defiance by continuing a romantic relationship with Nogma, the village escalates its punishment: he is sentenced to death. His brother, tasked with carrying out the execution,

secretly spares him, allowing Saga to flee and live in a distant village, far removed from his community. However, Saga eventually returns for his mother's funeral. Saga's act of mourning becomes his undoing. Confronted by the villagers' repressive gaze, his brother finally carries out the sentence, killing Saga to restore the community's sense of order.

Tragedy The tragic character is often defined not by moral failure, but by the irreconcilable conflict between personal conviction and the forces of fate, society, or tradition. As conceived by playwrights such as Jean Racine and William Shakespeare, the tragic figure is caught in a web of passion, duty, and impossible choices. In Racine's *Andromaque*, characters like Pyrrhus and Oreste are driven by obsessive love and political obligation, leading to betrayal, madness, and death. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the titular prince is paralyzed by moral doubt and the burden of revenge, ultimately consumed by the very justice he seeks. These characters are marked by their depth and their refusal, or inability, to conform to unjust expectations. Their suffering evokes not only pity, but a sense of inevitability, as they are crushed by systems larger than themselves. This dynamic is vividly realized in Ouédraogo's *Tilai*, where the protagonist's resistance to tradition leads not to redemption, but to ruin. From this perspective, Ouédraogo's postcolonial film enters into an **untimely** [why untimely?] conversation with classical literature, echoing its tragic form while grounding it in the cultural and moral tensions of traditional Africa. In Ouédraogo's *Tilai*, tragedy emerges not from individual failure but from the collision between personal desire and an unyielding moral code.

Illustrative moments: The forbidden love between Saga and Nogma, complicated by her marriage to Saga's father, becomes an act of defiance against tradition. The young couple's choice to be together is not met with empathy: They are both ostracized, shamed and exiled, and, in the case of Saga, killed. Tragedy extends beyond Saga's and Nogma's fates. Kougri, Saga's brother, confesses to his mother and to young Kuilga that he is torn between familial loyalty and societal duty. He acknowledges that the whole village is acting foolishly, and that his brother and Nogma are dealt with much injustice. Yet, he carries out Saga's execution. Saga, Nogma, and Kougri are trapped within a traditional system that punishes even their most human impulses--love, loyalty, and compassion.



Patriarchy Patriarchy operates as a dominant social order that prioritizes male control and generational hierarchy, often suppressing personal agency and emotional autonomy. It dictates how individuals relate to one another, shaping family structures, romantic choices, and moral expectations. Under this system, both women and men are confined to roles that serve tradition, with obedience to elders seen as sacred. Resistance is rarely tolerated and often met with harsh consequences. When defiance does occur, the response is swift and brutal. Women may be publicly punished and cast out, while men risk losing their lives. Even family bonds are sacrificed to preserve patriarchal authority, as loyalty to tradition overrides compassion, reinforcing the system's unyielding grip on personal freedom.

Illustrative moment: Nogma, Saga's fiancée, is forcibly remarried to Saga's father. Because this union is authorized by the village male elders as "the law", she cannot refuse it even though she does not desire it. Despite this, she secretly resists patriarchal authority by continuing her relationship with Saga. When their affair is discovered, the men of the village tie her up, restricting her movements, and punish her with a beating before her mother disowns her upon her father's suicide. In this traditional Mossi society, every action is taken to uphold patriarchy's honor, reinforcing its absolute control over individual lives.



Honor/pride Honor and pride are deeply ingrained values that influence how people behave and interact within their communities. They often serve to uphold tradition, reinforce social order, and maintain a sense of dignity. While these ideals can unify and inspire, they can also become rigid and unforgiving, especially when personal desires conflict with communal expectations. In many cultures, honor reflects on one's entire family or group, and any perceived dishonor can bring lasting shame. Pride, similarly, can compel individuals to protect their reputation at any cost, even when it means sacrificing happiness or relationships. When these values are prioritized above compassion or personal freedom, they can lead to irreversible consequences.

Illustrative moment: Saga, after a long absence from his village, returns to discover that his lover, Nogma, has been married to his father, making her his "mother" by tradition. Despite this, Saga and Nogma continue their relationship in secret, defying societal norms. When their affair is discovered, the weight of dishonor proves unbearable for Nogma's father. He hangs himself from a tree in order to avoid living with shame and dishonor. Despite the education he gave his daughter to be respectful of ancestral traditional order, she has strayed away and brought shame on the family. So, he chooses death over a life of disgrace. His death will not be the only one to redress humiliation. To restore his father's dignity, Saga is sentenced to death, and his brother, Kougri, is ordered to carry out the execution. However, Kougri, torn between loyalty to his family and his bond with his brother, pretends to fulfill his duty but secretly spares Saga's life. For a time, Saga remains hidden, but his return for his mother's funeral reignites the tension. The villagers' accusing gazes weigh heavily on Kougri, marking him as a traitor to customs. Unable to endure their silent judgment, Kougri picks up a gun, kills his brother, and exiles himself from the village. Thus, honor figures as an unforgiving force that make personal desires bow to societal expectations.

Change/transition Change and transition often arise through tension, between duty and desire, tradition and transformation. They are sparked by quiet revolts and conscious departures from accepted norms. Such shifts may begin with uncertainty, but they gather strength as individuals challenge the structures that confine them. Transition is not linear; it weaves together resistance and continuity, personal defiance and collective reckoning. As outdated customs start to unravel, new possibilities surface, ones defined by agency, adaptability, and hope. Each rupture creates space for a different future, even as echoes of the past persist. Whether subtle or bold, these movements redefine identity and reshape the social landscape. In *Tilai*, change and transition unfold through Nogma and Kuilga's defiance of patriarchal norms

Illustrative moment: Nogma and her little sister are the agents of change. Nogma refuses to fully submit to tradition. Though forced into marriage with Saga's father, she continues her love affair with Saga, challenging both her father and her husband. She risks banishment, but her actions mark the beginning of a shift in how women assert their autonomy. Kuilga, though still a child, embodies the next step in this resistance. She laments Nogma's fate, refusing to accept that love should be dictated by societal expectations. When Kougri dismisses her concerns, she accuses him of being as stupid as the other men in the village. Unlike the men, Kuilga does not view tradition as unchangeable. She secretly helps her sister Nogma meet her lover, Saga. Kuilga signals the emergence of a new era, one where women begin to contest rigid customs rather than resigning themselves to fate. This transformation becomes undeniable when Nogma, in broad daylight, openly invites Saga to her bed, disregarding the social order she once had to navigate in secrecy. Witnessing this act, Saga's aunt exclaims that "times have really changed."



The law (of the father) The law of the father represents a foundational principle in many traditional societies, where paternal authority governs not only the household but also the moral and social fabric of the community. This patriarchal order places the father at the center of decision-making, with his word treated as law. His role extends beyond caregiving to enforcing discipline, preserving honor, and maintaining lineage. In such systems, obedience to the father is equated with respect for tradition, and any challenge to his authority is seen as a threat to social stability. The father's control often dictates personal relationships, marriage arrangements, and the resolution of conflicts. While this structure can offer order and continuity, it can also suppress individual agency and emotional truth, especially when the father's will clashes with personal desires. In *Tilai*, the law of the father is an unyielding force that dictates

social order, morality, and personal relationships. The film portrays a patriarchal system where the father's authority is absolute, and his decisions shape the fate of his family.

Illustrative moment: Saga's father enforces his authority by marrying Nogma and condemning his son, showing how the law of the father demands submission, even at the cost of life. Saga's father takes Nogma, his son's fiancée, as his own wife, asserting his dominance over both his son and the community's traditions. This act reflects a broader societal expectation that the father's will is unquestionable. When Saga defies this law by continuing his relationship with Nogma, he is branded as dishonorable, outcast, and the male elders, especially his father, decree that he must die to restore the family's reputation. The father's sentence follows Saga all the way to his self-imposed exile, and, when, on the occasion of his mother's funerals, Saga comes back home he faces his sentence: He is killed by his brother, whom the law of the father has made his executioner.



Duty vs Desire The tension between cultural duty and personal desire lies at the heart of countless human stories, shaping choices that leave lasting consequences. Cultural traditions often carry with them a profound sense of identity, belonging, and inherited obligation—guiding individuals to honor their elders, uphold family legacies, or preserve communal values. Yet, personal desire, love, freedom, self-expression, can quietly clash with those very expectations. The result is often a painful reckoning, where one must decide whether to conform or resist. In the story of Nogma, Saga, and Kougri, this conflict reaches a tragic crescendo. Mambéty shows how tradition, while often rooted in wisdom and stability, can also demand unbearable costs when it refuses to evolve with the hearts of those it governs. The question it leaves behind is timeless: when duty and desire diverge, what must one forsake to remain whole?

Illustrative moment: Nogma, Saga, and Kougri each face a profound moral conflict between loyalty to tradition and their personal pursuit of happiness. Nogma and Saga are in love, longing to build a life together. But during Saga's extended absence from the village, Nogma is betrothed, without her consent, to Saga's father, forcing her to sacrifice her own desires to uphold custom. Though devastated by the betrayal, Saga cannot openly defy his father; instead, he continues to see Nogma in secret. When their clandestine romance is uncovered, Saga's brother, Kougri, is commanded to restore their father's honor by carrying out his brother's execution. Torn between duty and love, Kougri attempts to fake Saga's death. Kougri confides the absurdity of the law and his dilemma between loyalty and duty to his mother and to young Kuilga. But when the deception is exposed, he is left with no choice: he kills his beloved brother and exiles himself from the village, burdened by grief and bound by a tradition that demanded too much.



Exile and Belonging Exile and belonging are deeply intertwined concepts that reflect the tension between individual identity and communal acceptance. Exile is not always a matter of geography—it can be a state of emotional isolation, a severing from one's roots, family, or sense of home. Belonging, on the other hand, offers comfort, identity, and connection, but often comes with conditions: conformity, obedience, and sacrifice. In many traditional societies, stepping outside prescribed norms—even for love, justice, or personal truth—can result in exclusion. The community protects its values by casting out those who challenge them, making exile a punishment for nonconformity. Yet, exile can also be a form of resistance, a way to preserve one's integrity when belonging demands betrayal of the self.

Illustrative moment: Exile in *Tilai* is both physical and emotional. When characters break with tradition, even out of love, compassion, or moral conflict, they're cast out, sometimes literally, sometimes within the fabric of their own families. For refusing his father's marriage with Nogma, his sweetheart, Saga self-exiles. He builds himself a hut on the outskirts of the village, cut ties with his family, and continues his romantic affair with Nogma. When, to assuage the family honor, Kougri kills his brother Saga, Kougri, too, self-exiles. Kougri's self-exile after killing his brother reflects the price of preserving communal honor at

the cost of inner peace. Belonging, in this context, becomes conditional, granted only to those who conform, not necessarily those who act with integrity.

Absurdism and determinism *Tilai* examines the clash between absurdism and determinism in a society ruled by unbreakable traditions. Determinism appears in the way characters are bound by inherited codes of honor, family loyalty, and patriarchal authority—leaving little room for personal freedom. Every action seems preordained, as if fate is dictated by custom rather than choice. Yet absurdism surfaces in the characters' emotional struggles and irrational decisions. Saga's forbidden love for Nogma, Kougri's inner conflict over killing his brother, and the tragic consequences that follow all expose the futility of seeking justice or meaning within a rigid system. The film suggests that even sincere, compassionate acts are punished when they defy tradition. In this way, *Tilai* portrays life as a tragic cycle where people are forced to play roles they didn't choose, highlighting the absurdity of a world where personal desires are crushed by the weight of inherited duty.

Illustrative moment: After Saga is condemned to death by their father for dishonoring the family, Kougri, Saga's brother, is ordered to carry out the execution. Determinism is evident here: Kougri's role as the obedient son and enforcer of tradition leaves him no choice but to comply, even though it means killing his own brother. Yet, in an absurdist gesture, Kougri fakes the execution and hides Saga, hoping to preserve both family honor and his bond with his brother. This act of defiance, though rooted in compassion, leads to deeper tragedy. When Saga returns for his mother's funeral, the community's silent judgment weighs heavily on Kougri. Unable to reconcile his guilt, his loyalty, and the crushing expectations of tradition, he kills Saga for real and exiles himself. His final act underscores the absurdity of a system that punishes mercy and demands suffering.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is the film's title (*The Law*) paradoxical?
2. How does the film portray tradition as both a source of identity and a barrier to emotional expression?
3. In what ways do the characters' silences speak louder than their actions?
4. How do the characters' responses to shame and dishonor reflect the burden of communal judgment?
5. How does *Tilai* portray patriarchy as a system that enforces control through violence and sacrifice?
6. How does Kougri's decision to fake the execution, and later carry it out for real, highlight the conflict between personal agency and cultural determinism?