

Toolkit: Senegal on the Screen

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ScreenWorlds



Tribute to Mambéty at Ngor Island (Photo donated by Abdoulaye Diallo).

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Bio

Estrella Sendra is a scholar, teacher, filmmaker, journalist and festival organiser, currently working as Senior Teaching Fellow in Film and Screen Studies at SOAS, University of London, where she teaches African Filmmaking, among other courses; and as Teaching Fellow in Global Media Industries, at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. Since 2011, when she directed *Témoignages de l'autre côté / Testimonials from the other side* (2011), an awarded documentary film about migration, she has been developing a regional expertise in Senegal. In 2012, she worked as a journalist in the cultural section of the national newspaper *Le Soleil*. In 2013, she co-directed another documentary on migration, this time, as approached by Senegalese artists, entitled *Témoignages... « waa suñu gaal » / Testimonials from the people in Senegal* (2016), entirely shot in Senegal with a Senegalese crew, starting from co-director, the Senegalese journalist and researcher Mariama Badji. In 2018, she completed her PhD on festivals in Senegal, which traced, for the first time, the history of festivalisation in the country. She was a Visiting Fellow at Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, where she collaborated and co-wrote '50th Anniversary of the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres: A Comparative Study of the Engagement of the Population in 1966 and 2010 Festivals' with Senegalese sociologist Saliou Ndour, then published in *Interventions-International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2018). She has also published 'Displacement and the Quest for Identity in Alain Gomis' Cinema' in *Black Camera: an International Film Journal* (2018), among others. She is one of the researchers behind the Archive of Pan-African Festivals. She was the director of the Cambridge African Film Festival in 2014, and 2015, and has been involved in further festivals in Spain, Senegal, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Overview

Senegal has often been heralded as the capital of African cinema. As Claire Andrade-Watkins (1993:30) puts it, during the first two decades following the independence of African countries from France, Senegal was "at the epicentre" of the film production. The country is the home of Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007), known as the "father" of African cinema despite the filmmaker's reluctance to the term. Sembène is the director of one of the first narrative films made in Africa, *Borom Sarret* (1963, French,

22 min.), and of the first postcolonial feature-length Black African film, *La Noire De.../Black Girl* (1966, Wolof and French, 65 min.), a milestone in his film career, whose release coincided with the celebration of the First World Festival of Negro Arts, following the independence of Senegal from France in 1960. It is also the home of Safi Faye (1943-), who has been referred to as a pioneering woman filmmaker, but who could, in the same way, be considered as the “mother” of African cinema, as the first black African woman to direct a feature-length film that would be commercially distributed, *Kaddu Beykat / Letter from the Village* (1975, 90 min.). They both have played a crucial role in the decolonisation and womanisation of the gaze. Their work was not, however, not funded by the two institutions created within the French Ministry of Cooperation to provide technical and financial assistance to African filmmakers from countries that had been under their colonisation. These were the Consortium Audiovisual International (CAI), established in 1961, and the Film Bureau, in 1963, functioning until the restructuring of the Ministry in 1979. Sembène’s work was seen as too critical against the French colonial power’s impact in Senegal for it to be considered for funding, which is reflective of the irony of such “assistance.” This failed attempt of censoring Sembène’s decolonising gaze did not prevent the filmmaker from developing a prolific career from 1963 to 2004. Ever since, the country has witnessed a large number of film productions, both fiction and non-fiction, engaging in a wide range of aesthetic approaches, while self-referencing and self-reflexive. Despite the decline of funding sources, shutting down and abandonment of cinema venues in the late 1970s, and the various challenges faced up to today, the country is still a centre of film culture and production. “Rooted cosmopolitan filmmakers” – borrowing Kwame Appiah’s term – like franco-Senegalese filmmakers Alain Gomis (1972-) and Mati Diop (1982-) have joined the (trans)national film scene, with internationally renowned and multi-awarded films. In 2019 Mati Diop became the first black African woman filmmaker to win an award at the Cannes Film Festival, with *Atlantique/ Atlantics* (2019, 107 min.), which soon became available on Netflix. Alain Gomis has won twice the most prestigious award, the Yennenga Golden Stallion, at the one of the longest-running Pan-African film festivals in the continent and world, FESPACO, with *Tey/ Today* (2012, 89 min.) and *Félicité* (2017, 129 min.). The latter was partially funded by the Fonds de Promotion de l’Industrie Cinématographique et Audiovisuelle (FOPICA), a fund established by the Senegalese government in 2002, but functional since 2014. Following Gomis’ success in 2017, the president, Macky Sall, doubled the funding. Two years later, Alain Gomis would also fund the Yennenga Centre, a cinema hub in Dakar devoted to the training of young Senegalese filmmakers. The resulting films have also been screened at awarded at FESPACO and various other film festivals. In 2020, the work of Senegalese filmmakers, particularly women, such as Angèle Assie Diabang, whose filmography is mainly composed of documentary films and short films, and younger filmmakers, such as Khadiatou Sow, were highly celebrated in FESPACO. The films below are illustrative of such rich and diverse film production in the country. The texts seek to offer an introduction to Senegalese cinema, with particular emphasis on the perspective by African film scholars. They further examine the work of specific filmmakers, encouraging comparative approaches to the study of Senegalese cinema and broader critical understandings of screen worlds.

Key Texts:

- Adesokan, Akin (2019). “The Invisible Government of the Powerful”: Joseph Gaï Ramaka’s Cinema of Power. In Harrow, Kenneth W., & Garritano, Carmela (eds.) (2018). *A companion to African cinema*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. : 136–154.

- Akudinobi, Jude (2006). 'Durable Dreams: Dissent, Critique, and Creativity in Faat Kiné and Moolaadé.' In *Meridians*, 6(2): 177-194.
- Diop, Mag Maguette (2017). *Cinéma sénégalais: Sembène Ousmane. Le précurseur et son legs*. Dakar: L'Harmattan.
- Gadjigo, Samba (2010). *Ousmane Sembène: The making of a militant artist*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank, & Gabriel, Teshome H. (2002). 'Safi Faye' and 'Djibril Diop Mambety.' In *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations With Filmmakers*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 29-40; 121-132.
- Vetinde, Lifongo J., & Fofana, Amadou Tidiane (2014). *Ousmane Sembene and the politics of culture*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Vieyra, Paulin Soumanou (1983). *Le cinéma au Sénégal*. Bruxelles: [Paris]: OCIC; L'Harmattan.

Please note there is also a Close-Up on Senegalese Cinema you may want to consult for an analysis of the current state of cinema venues in the country and of contemporary filmmakers:

- Krueger Enz, Molly & Bryson, Devin (eds.) (2018). 'CLOSE-UP: Senegalese Cinema.' In *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, 9 (2), Spring 2018.
This includes the following articles (in order of appearance):
- Krueger Enz, Molly & Bryson, Devin (2018). 'Introduction: Forging a New Path: Plurality, Social Change, and Innovation in Contemporary Senegalese Cinema.'
- Fofana, Amadou T. (2018). 'A Critical and Deeply Personal Reflection: Malick Aw on Cinema in Senegal Today.'
- Sendra, Estrella (2018). 'Displacement and the quest for Identity in Alain Gomis's Cinema.'
- Bryson, Devin (2018). 'See the Sky: Subjectivity and Social Meaning in Adams Sie's Filmmaking.'
- Petty, Sheila (2018). 'Unsilencing History: Reclaiming African Cultural Heritage in Kemtiyu - Séex Anta.'
- Krueger Enz, Molly (2018). 'Joseph Gaï Ramaka and Nicolas Sawalo Cissé promote Change Through Cinema: Representations of Flooding and Trash in the Margins of Dakar.'

Further readings:

- Adesokan, Akin (2011). 'Fitful Decolonization: Xala and the Poetics of Double Fetishism.' In *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Andrade-Watkins, Claire (1993). 'Film Production in Francophone Africa 1961 to 1977: Ousmane Sembène – An Exception.' In Gadjigo, Samba et al. (eds.) (1993). *Ousmane Sembène: Dialogues with Critics and Writers*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 29-36.
- Bâ, Saër Maty & Taylor-Jones, Kate E. (2012). 'Affective passions: the dancing female body and colonial rupture in *Zouzou* (1934) and *Karmen Geï* (2001).'
- Bâ, S. M. & Taylor-Jones, K. E. (eds.) (2012). *De-westernizing Film Studies*. New York: Routledge: 53-66.
- Bisschoff, Lizelle & Van de Peer, Stefanie (2020). 'Daughters and their Mothers: Between Conflict and Acceptance.' In Bisschoff, Lizelle & Van de Peer, Stefanie (2020). *Women in African Cinema: Beyond the Body Politic*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dima, Vlad (2017). *Sonic space in Djibril Diop Mambety's films*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fofana, Amadou Tidiane (2012). *The films of Ousmane Sembène: Discourse, culture, and politics*. Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press.
- Harrow, Kenneth (2013). 'Trashy Women: *Karmen Geï*, *L'Oiseau Rebelle*.' In Harrow, Kenneth (2013). *Trash: African cinema from below*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Murphy, David, & Williams, Patrick (2007). *Postcolonial African cinema: Ten directors*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Niang, Sada (2003). *Djibril Diop Mambéty: Un cinéaste à contre-courant*. Dakar: L'Harmattan.
- Pfaff, Françoise (2010). *À l'écoute du cinéma sénégalais*. Paris: Harmattan.

List of Films

The distribution and exhibition of African cinema remains one of the most daunting challenges faced by the different industries across the continent. However, thanks to the spread of video-on-demand platforms and streaming websites, there is an increasing access to African titles. Where possible, I have indicated when the DVD or DCP (digital cinema package) is available for rent or sale. Due to the dynamic nature of the Internet, some links or streaming websites may no longer be functional by the time of consulting this toolkit. If you have any trouble locating or accessing the film, please get in touch with Estrella at es29@soas.ac.uk

Touki Bouki/ The Journey of the Hyena

(Djibril Diop Mambéty, 1973, Senegal, 95 min.)

Touki Bouki is the most acclaimed title by Djibril Diop Mambéty (1945–1998), considered as “the most gifted of all African filmmakers” (Murphy & Williams, 2007: 91). The film won the International Film Critics’ Award at Cannes, and the Special Jury Award at the Moscow Film Festival. Touki Bouki is a film about those who dream of going abroad, embodied in the young couple of Anta and Mory. Through a highly experimental and poetic style and a remarkable emphasis on the aural dimension of film, Touki Bouki is also about the relationship between dreams, fantasy and reality. As the couple lies by the sea, they dream about going to France, or rather their status when returning home. While the travel the city of Dakar, represented as a crossroads where contrasts and different cultural references and temporalities meet, Josephine Baker’s song ‘Paris, Paris’ resounds. Yet, when Anta and Mory have finally gathered the money, Mory no longer feels ready to leave... A recently restored film is available since 2008, thanks to Martin Scorsese’s World Cinema Foundation at the Cineteca di Bologna in Italy.

Accessibility:

- In DVD via Amazon.co.uk: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Touki-Bouki-Djibril-Diop-Mambéty/dp/B002UFGJYE/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=touki+bouki&qid=1579874830&sr=8-1
- In DVD via Amazon.fr: https://www.amazon.fr/Touki-Bouki-die-Reise-Hyne/dp/B002UFGJYE/ref=sr_1_2?__mk_fr_FR=ÅMÅŽŮÑ&keywords=touki+bouki&qid=1579874956&sr=8-2
- In DVD to be consulted in SOAS Library: <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/646809>
- Distribution via Janus Films: <http://www.janusfilms.com/films/1884>
- Online via Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/ToukiBoukiDjibrilDiopMambety1973DVDRip>
- Illegally online with Portuguese subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9e1C0k7sdg>

Xala

(Ousmane Sembène, 1975, Senegal, 123 min.)

Xala is a crucial title to understand the multi-layered work of this postcolonial artist, who was not just critical with the former colonial power, but also the postcolony, religion and various contradicting driving forces of a postcolonial country where people find themselves negotiating meanings and

values. It is an adaptation from Sembène's novel of the same title. The film opens with the celebration of the independence of Senegal, hijacked by the persistent influence of the former colonisers in the Senegalese political elites. Among them there is El Hadje Abdoucader Beye, who is also about to marry his third wife, but who is cursed with temporary sexual impotence. This serves as a broader metaphor – or, as Akin Adesokan puts it, “an allegorical fable” (2011: 57) to the political impotence of a corrupt and still dependent political elite. The film further features an inter-generational dialogue mother-daughter, in their different views to religion and polygamy, and daughter-father, with a powerful young woman who confronts her father for making her mother suffer and for his colonised mind. She is then portrayed as a form of resistance, as a heroine of the everyday struggle in postcolonial Senegal.

Accessibility:

- In DVD via Amazon.co.uk: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Xala-DVD-Region-US-NTSC/dp/B0009ETCP6/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=xala&qid=1579875280&s=dvd&sr=1-2
- In DVD via Fnac: <https://www.fnac.com/a1649505/Xala-Thierno-Leye-DVD-Zone-2>
- In DVD to be consulted in SOAS Library: <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/779374>
Illegally online with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-a15ZLKxjM>
- In VHS via Amazon.co.uk: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Xala-VHS-Thierno-Leye/dp/B00004CQSM/ref=sr_1_4?keywords=xala&qid=1579875328&s=dvd&sr=1-4

Mossane

(Safi Faye, 1996, Senegal, 105 min.)

Mossane is an indispensable film to understand the womanist dimension of African film and the crucial role that women have played in African cinema, both behind and in front of the camera (Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2020). She is a filmmaker who places women at the centre of her stories, and thus, at the heart of Senegalese society, particularly in rural areas. Mossane represents the power of women through the strong relationships between mother and daughter and friends. The film follows a young woman called Mossane, a name which derives from the Serer word ‘moss,’ which means ‘beauty’, ‘purity’, ‘innocence’ or ‘virtue’. With such portrayal, Faye was challenging the idea of beauty, stating that she “wanted the most beautiful girl in the world to be African.” Such beauty, however, makes Mossane desired by all, even her own brother. Whilst she is promised to Diogoye, who has migrated to France and would bring financial income to Mossane’s family, she is in love with Fara, a modest university student. The film focuses on Mossane’s struggle and determination to claim her own agency, engaging in an intimate relation with her mother, and having to confront spiritual and social values. The film further subverts the objectifying male gaze, with a depiction of young woman as in control of their own sensuality. It is inspired by Safi Faye’s experience of motherhood.

Accessibility:

- In DVD to be consulted in SOAS Library: <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/737906>

Karmen Geï

(Joseph Gai Ramaka, 2001, Senegal, France, Canada, 86 min.)

Karmen Geï is one of the four titles featuring a woman from Africa or with African heritage of the over eighty film adaptations from Carmen by Mérimée. It is a particularly remarkable adaptation where Karmen is so powerful in that she challenges and subverts all kinds of “official” forms of power, embodying freedom. This is represented by her sexuality, as she is admired and loved by everyone, regardless their gender. The opening scene is set in the courtyard of a prison for women, located in the emblematic island of Gorée, where slaves were kept during the years of colonisation. Senegalese sabar percussion and American jazz meet in a sonic space where past, present and future meet. Karmen sensually dances towards the guardian of the prison, Angélique, who cannot resist her seduction. Such seduction operates as a reversal of power, as a disruptive act, with a fluid sexuality that challenges hegemonic power structures.

Available:

- In DVD via SOAS Library: <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/717698>
- Illegally online via youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kRRZO_Zgl8

Yandé Codou, la griotte de Senghor

(Angèle Diabang, 2008, Senegal, Belgium, 52 min.)

Among the work by Angèle Diabang, this is an emblematic title due to its historical value and the way in which it addresses two of the key themes in the director’s filmography, the focus on women and the role of oral tradition in Senegalese society. The film is an intimate portrayal of Yandé Codou Sène (1932–2010), the Serer Senegalese singer who was also the griot of the first president of independent Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Alongside a range of testimonials, praising the work of the artist, who would pass away a couple of years after the film release, the documentary features the soundtrack by Senegalese acclaimed musician, Youssou N’Dour, and Wasis Diop, who is also Mati Diop’s father, and Djibril Diop Mambéty’s brother and composer of many of the soundtracks of his films.

Available:

- Trailer (in French): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z00yHd4mpxs>
- DVD available to buy via: africalia@africalia.be. More info: <https://africalia.be/en/Creatives-work-9/Documentaries/Yande-Codou-la-griotte-de-Senghor?lang=en> or via the director’s production company: http://www.karoninka.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=102

Tey/Today

(Alain Gomis, 2012, Senegal, France, 89 min.)

Tey is an absolute masterpiece by Alain Gomis. Following three short films and two feature-length films, who were dealing, in various ways, with subjects desiring to go back home, this film is already located in such desired yet impossible return. It is thus the one in which the experience of displacement, triggering a quest for identity, is particularly painful, because it is psychological, it is a kind of alienation resulting from the impossibility of the return. The film is thus particularly multi-sensory, where the struggle and pain are embodied in Satché and reflected through an aesthetic approach pushing the audiovisual dimension of film and taking it to the haptic. The film starts with the announcement of Satché's last day of his life, as communicated by the ancestors. The character would then wander the streets of Dakar, which he left for America and where he questions his existence and the people who have played a role in his life.

Available:

- In DVD via Amazon.fr: https://www.amazon.fr/Aujourd'hui-Saul-Williams/dp/B00DRBP2KC/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?__mk_fr_FR=ÅMÅŽÕÑ&keywords=tey+Alain+gomis&qid=1579874501&sr=8-1-fkmr0
- VOD: <https://video-a-la-demande.orange.fr/film/AUJOURDHUIXW0081145/aujourd-hui>
- More options: <http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm-201920/telecharger-vod/>

La Pirogue/The Pirogue

(Moussa Touré, 2012, France, Senegal, Germany, 87 min.)

This is a crucial film for the understanding of migration from a Senegalese point of view. It focuses on irregular migration, and more specifically, on the journey in the pirogue towards Canary Island, where a storm complicates the journey even further. A sense of uneasiness and silence make Nafy understand that there is something wrong with her husband, Baye Leye. However, Baye, who works as a fisherman, does not tell her what has just happened. Baye has been tempted to “travel” by a man managing irregular journeys to Spain. Despite his initial decline to the offer, he ends up joining, as his close friends Kaba and Abou are determined to go. Without any notice to the family, they all board a pirogue on an ocean whose scope of hostility had not been foreseen. The film shows the injustice and danger of the portrayal of Europe as El dorado, in a country where the population is still trying to overcome the inequalities and precarity following centuries of colonisation.

Available:

- Illegally online with Portuguese subtitles via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcUnsJsWEFY>
- DVD available to buy via Amazon.co.uk: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Great-African-Films-Vol-Pirogue/dp/B00TTGB5BE/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?keywords=la+pirogue+moussa+touré&qid=1580400711&sr=8-1-fkmr0
- DVD available to buy via Amazon.fr: https://www.amazon.fr/Pirogue-Souleymane-Seye-Ndiaye/dp/B00A4MXTZM/ref=sr_1_1?__mk_fr_FR=ÅMÅŽÕÑ&keywords=la+pirogue+moussa+touré&qid=1580400795&sr=8-1

SenCinema

(Amadou Fofana and Josh Gibson, 2017, United States, Senegal, 34 min.)

SenCinema is a medium-length documentary film reviewing the historic importance of cinema in Senegal. The film starts focusing on venues. As Coumba Sarr, director of Digital Mobile Cinema (CAN) in Dakar, reflects about the number of functional cinema theatres in Dakar, five at the moment, we are also taken to previous cinema theatres, now in ruins, Liberté, El Mansour... From there, a series of extracts from Senegalese film directors interweave with the testimonials of various people who are struggling to keep cinema alive and bring it to different places across the country. From Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty to Alain Gomis, this is a concise yet indispensable piece to understand the great contributions from Senegal to cinema and the shared desire to do something about it. The film is co-directed by Amadou Fofana, one of the key scholars on Senegalese cinema, and more specifically, on Ousmane Sembène; and Josh Gibson, a moving image artist and Associate Professor at Duke University.

Available:

Please get in touch with Estrella, who will put you in touch with the filmmakers.

Atlantique/Atlantics

(Mati Diop, 2019, Senegal, France, Belgium, 109 min.)

This is another crucial film to understand the complex context that fosters irregular migration. While films on migration very often focus on men who leave, this film examines the phenomenon instead through the point of view of those young women “whose” men leave without even telling them. Ada is a 17-year-old woman in love with Souleiman, a young construction worker. They secretly meet, flirt and kiss along the beach and streets of Dakar, as a preamble of a promised implied first night of sexual encounter that does not quite arrive. Ada, however, has been promised to a wealthy Senegalese man based abroad. When she leaves her home to meet her beloved Souleiman at her friend's bar, she encounters the emptiness and sadness of a bar where there are just lonely young women. Her boyfriends have all left. The film adopts a phantasmagoric aesthetic style, that resonates with the director's uncle, Mambéty. The spirit of the young men reincarnate in those women who go search the manager of the constructions company, blaming him for not paying them. The film is further reflective of the diversity of lifestyles, values and beliefs in the capital of Senegal, and of the way in which that supposes an extra layer of strength in young women's everyday struggle.

Available:

Online via Netflix: <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=atlantic&jbv=81082007&jbp=0&jbr=0>