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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mr4h8rp>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 1(3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Mativo, Wilson

**Publication Date**

1971

**DOI**

10.5070/F713016375

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CULTURAL DILEMMA OF THE AFRICAN FILM

by

Wilson Mativo

Francis Bebey, the adviser to UNESCO in Paris on film, radio and television, is reported to have said that the cinema "could become the most African of all art forms because African art is also a total art". (*Africa Report*, November, 1970). The term "art" is one of the most misused intellectual subjects, but in this case there is no denying that the way the African has begun to use the film medium is, to say the least, un-Hollywood, both in theme and treatment. The African filmmaker, like the African writer, seems to realize, and rightly so, that he has no right to engage his work in pettiness. He must say something, and as far as that goes there is ample material to make this always possible.

The African filmmaker, unlike his South American counterpart, is caught between a personal choice between an inward interpretation of this new life and an outward manifestation of the acceptance of its material provision. He looks back in painful yearning for the life of his forefathers now receding in historical oblivion and slowly dissolving into the thin air of time. He can only bring that experience back to himself in a form of dream, and like all dreams, he finds his daily life tyrannically unrelated to his hallucinations. Like the South American filmmaker, he is concerned with a revolution, but a revolution which no guns can win. Once upon a time, he was culturally raped, and with his virginity taken, he cries desperately day and night for its reinception; hence, his dilemma.

Oumarou Ganda's *Cabascabo* is one illustration of this dilemma. It is a question of choosing between living a "civilized", empty life in town and a humble existence in the countryside. False appearances of good life victimize a man whose naivete dictates an imitation of life rather than its interpretation. He finds a somewhat satisfying solution by refusing to smoke or drink, in fact he literally walks out of this habit and returns to lead a country life. This metaphorical visualization of a personal dilemma is only the more painful because we know that it is not easy to walk out of it spotless and at will.

*Mandabi* by Ousmane Sembene points at the problem of communication at the cultural level as another dilemma-creating element. The patronizing attitude of the new life towards

the old, advocated by its willing agents, is responsible for the suffering of an individual who is trying to make himself understood under extremely difficult conditions. The new social institution does not only refuse to understand him, but also it punishes him for not keeping up to its sophistication. The film is a criticism of the new world -- this intruder who insists on being listened to, not so much of "the new elite", to borrow a cliché from Robert A. Mortimer (*Africa Report*, November, 1970), but a serious and desperate appeal for an establishment of some communication between the "modern" and the "old" order of things. We pity the old man not because his nephew cheats him on the money and instead gives him bags of rice, but because he finds himself talking to a blind paper-oriented generation which scorns him. But to say that they scorn the old man on purpose is to give them too high a credit, for the point is that they are unaware of their own short-comings; they will settle at nothing short of a birth certificate and an identity card, forgetting that the system under which they are operating was born much later than he.

Moustapha Alassane, even by physical appearance, is a satirist. *Le Voyage de Sim*, his political cartoon is an obvious indication of the satirical characteristic of his films. His *Le Retour d'un Aventurier* handles the question of cultural invasion in a manner likely to be misunderstood by the African and the American "masses", but a manner certainly understood by concerned people. The fact that the adventurer brings back guns, instruments of destruction and death, indicates the poisonous nature of "borrowed robes". Western "civilization" has proved to be a little too expensive for human life. In Africa it has brought with it atoms of cultural wreck, separating the so-called "educated" from their own people, teaching them how to cheat and rob others in a subtle way commonly misnamed "hard work". The fact that Moustapha uses the "Westerner" to illustrate his point is only too relevant in the sense that in the "Westerner" one is a hero by virtue of his ability to live at the expense of others. He kills in the guise of protecting somebody else from danger, but in the final analysis, this proves to be an act of selfishness, as this somebody else always becomes his follower, his possession. In an African context nothing is more abominable.

Henri Duparc's *Mouna, le Reve d'un Artiste* reveals the painful inward existence of an artist as a representation of the cultural position of the sensitive new African. Sensitivity, though a higher quality of human life, is not always the best characteristic on an individual basis. This is the feeling one gets on watching the sculptor suffer the agony of



losing the girl he had sheltered, and being exploited by his merchant friend. His visit to a typical "civilized" man ends in frustration, as this man is more concerned with glorifying his wife and his television than with knowing the implication and impact of such outward blessings on life. The ritual dance at the nightclub seems to be the final preparation for the journey back to the soul and spirit of his real home -- that is, the traditional life that he is so much trying to live by carving it in his statues. And when he addresses one of his statues at the end of the film, "you are not dead", we feel that he is engaging in a self-lie. His culture is, in one sense, dead; and that is the tragedy of the story. He is a widower, a lonely man, left floating on mud like a frog.

An indifferent spectator might ask, "What is going on here?"; but for us, the question goes beyond its face value. It is a question directed to the present African generation by posterity. It is almost an accusation of this section of the human race, whose contentment rests mainly in their insensitivity and their total ignorance of what they lack. The answer to this question, therefore, is not "his woman is dead", no matter how much the merchant stresses it, but "it is the new African's dilemma".

Again, *Le Troisième Jour* by Edouard Saily deals with the same kind of situation. This time the cultural deprivation is represented by the death of the fisherman's mother. He wonders and wanders about his life alone without a mother image. The mother theme represents a firm and secure basis, taking the form of safety and love of one's true parent -- culture. This question of wandering misfits is examined by Desire Ecare in his *Concerto pour un Exil*, in which a certain fraction of a given people find themselves thrown into a foreign land. The difficulties that they face are not entirely of their own making, and their complaints can only be understood against the background of their origin. But their naive hope of "going back to Africa" is a result of their ignorance of their actual condition in the life they are leading. For the point is, having been pushed into a mode of life, one becomes an exile. To change back to the former condition is a feat. And this is exactly where the new African finds himself. He finds that, all of a sudden, he has too many challenges. He can either blind himself to these challenges and seek the primrose way to eternal bliss, or accept them and suffer the consequences of his decision the rest of his life.

*La Femme au Couteau* by Bassori Timité is a culmination of the African cultural dilemma. Its division into reality and dream world, representing the new way of life and the cultural

vicissitudes, respectively, are the painful experiences of this traditionally "formless" African. The woman with the knife represents those occasional flashes of neglected life which victimize sensitive people. She appears not as a possible future partner, but as a real menace ready to stab him if need be. If the young man decided to ignore her and continued to live normally, could he do so comfortably? But of course, the real problem is that, under these circumstances, there is no normal life; one must do something in order to save oneself. This disease can neither be healed by the witchdoctor nor by the medicine-doctor, because it is not a disease caused by witchcraft or by biological bacteria, but by cultural virus. It can be put under control only by living in the past -- hence, the dream, as it is illustrated in the film. While the young man jumps up in protest and fear when the woman appears, the old man (in the dream) takes it very calmly, for example in the on-and-off appearances in the taxi. The arrival on the scene of a girl who becomes the young man's fiancée is a mere consolation, a cave in which to hide in a time of storm, not a solution. The beach sequence is ironic in the sense that the two lovers have chosen to live all by themselves (the beach is empty except for the two of them) only to be invaded there by the woman with a knife. Their apparent disappearance into the sea, hand in hand, does not solve any problem either, since neither the poetic murmuring of the water nor the softness of the sand can protect them from this torturing woman. She appears at any time anywhere, and it looks as if she is determined to continue doing so.

Asked how he related to this situation, Timité once said that he felt victimized. The word "victimize", in spite of its active form, is passive in meaning. It implies hopelessness and lack of self-defense. The educated African hangs here by his ankles. He has no choice but to watch his destiny being determined by social set-ups which he is helping to uphold. He is free to reject them if he can, but he should also be prepared to pay the high price for this choice. For one thing, he does not quite belong to the traditional orchard where his forefathers once roamed. They would not understand his manners if he joined them. But he must insist on being heard even if he is crying in the wilderness. That is why he speaks French, English, or German instead of his mother tongue. He is as much a stranger to these languages as he is to his own, culturally speaking. He does not accept the western culture, and the culture of his own people does not accept him. He is, therefore, a stranger in both worlds, not by choice, but by fate.

But this is not to acquit him of the many charges brought



against him regarding his acquired position. It is to acquaint ourselves realistically with his lot before we pass judgment on him. He may be saying something to us, and our single-channeled ears could be the real culprit. At any rate, the trial has just begun.

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WILSON K. MATIVO is with the Voice of Kenya Television. He is currently on a study leave at UCLA with an African-American Institute scholarship, so as to augment his work in Kenya with filmmaking techniques. He has published several short stories in Ghala, an East African literary journal, and was Editor-in-Chief of The Scroll, a college magazine at Strathmore College (Kenya).