

## Utopias, Transgressions and Hybridity: Amadou Seck's Representation of Postcoloniality in *Saaraba*

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**Abstract:** With his first feature film *Saaraba* (Utopia), the emerging Senegalese film director, Amadou Salloum Seck adds to the repertoire of social realist films from Francophone Africa. The film enacts and describes the multiple changes, tensions and contradictions of the socio-cultural landscape of postindependence Senegal and by extension, Africa. My analysis of the film is underwritten by the premise that by exposing the current state of his country, Seck evokes the postcolonial condition. I show that *Saaraba* is a filmic narrative which lays bare the utopian quest, the dynamics of hybridity and transgressive cultural discourses that are central paradigms of postcoloniality. Seck's deployment of the theme of utopia puts into sharp relief the dystopian features of a failed postindependence society and the relentless quest for an ideal society after colonialism. Inscribed in Seck's critique of the present is the inevitability of change and the search for a new social praxis which is expressed by breaches of traditional conduct. His presentations of different visions of that imagined community illustrates the fact that a nation is never a monolithic but a plural construct. The hybridization of identity in postcolonial spaces, the film suggests, is inevitable due to the incessant penetration of foreign values and their intermingling with indigenous ones. To be sure, Senegal would not have remained static without its contact with the West, since every culture has its internal dynamics of change, but it is fair to posit that the momentum of change is driven by the exposure of the Senegalese people to foreign values.

In Africa we first thought that in 1960 with independence paradise would come. Now we know better. The whites have left indeed, but those in power now behave exactly the same way.

Ousmane Sembène

The notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe is no longer sustainable.

Renato Rosaldo

What interests me is exposing the problems of my people. I consider the cinema to be a means for political action. Nevertheless I don't want to make "poster films." Revolutionary films are another thing. Moreover, I am not so naive as to think that I could change Senegalese reality with a single film. But I think that if there were a whole group of us making films with the same orientation, we could alter reality a little bit.

Ousmane Sembène

In the final chapter of his book, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, Manthia Diawara delineates a typology of African cinema in which he identifies three kinds of cinematic narratives: "...the return to the sources, the historical confrontation between Africa and Europe and the social realist" (1992:140). Diawara aptly places *Saaraba* (Utopia), Amadou Salloum Seck's first feature film, in the last category. In fact, following the lead of his fellow countrymen, Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambety, Seck uses the cinematic medium to draw critical attention to the realities of his native Senegal and Africa in general. Although film critics such as Diawara, and Frank Ukadike have briefly discussed the social realism of *Saaraba* by pointing to its vivid depiction of the socio-political and cultural landscape of post-independence Senegal, they have focused exclusively on its exposure of present conditions. I propose to read *Saaraba* as a postcolonial text that at once enacts contemporary reality, points to future possibilities and articulates a discourse of resistance. Underlying my analysis is the position that the film is an engagement with the postcolonial condition for the issues it raises are an outgrowth of colonialism. To this end I will explore three concepts which, in my view, are key to understanding Seck's depiction of postcoloniality in the film: the longing for Utopia, transgressions and hybridity.

## Utopias

Although human existence is driven by the utopian impulse, that is the longing for an "ideal society," the relevance of Utopia in the development of social and political thought has been the subject of considerable debate among its proponents and detractors. Opponents of utopian thought argue that the concept is an idle and escapist scheme that has no bearing at all on the constructive discourse of society. One such detractor, Alexander Gray, argues that "...the weakness of all Utopias is necessarily that they dodge the real difficulty of how to change this present world into something better"(1964:64). Gray's assessment, it seems to me, is a misreading of utopian discourse for it eschews the reformist ideas that subtend the creation of Utopias. Certainly, not all Utopias are escapist. In fact, as Barbara Godwin and Keith Taylor have observed, some Utopias, "establish their non-escapist nature by developing theories of history which show the necessary relationship of their ideal societies to the present"(1987:37). Utopia thus serves as a model against which the state of society can be judged. It operates as a foil to the here-and-now reality and presents a sketch for an alternative model. As Vincent Geoghegan succinctly puts it, "The classic Utopia anticipates and criticizes. Its alternative fundamentally interrogates the present"(1987:12).

In the first epigraph Sembène alludes to the epistemological relevance of Utopia to African nationalist discourse. The vibrant anti-colonial rhetoric that paved the way for decolonization was spiced with glowing utopian promises. Colonialism was cast as the source of national problems and independence the ultimate solution for the emergence of an ideal national community. "Civilizations," George Lichteim has written, "are founded upon utopian and messianic promises which are never fulfilled, but without which there would be no progress"(quoted in Maurice Mesner, 1982:20). Lichteim's observation could be usefully applied to have a sense of the dynamics of the emergence of independent African nations. The so-called "triumph" over colonial occupation owed much to the ability of nationalist leaders at the time to paint a paradisiacal picture of a post-independent society. Needless to point out that the euphoric hope "...that with independence paradise would come,"<sup>1</sup> has been hopelessly dashed. However, the desire for change, the craving for a better postcolonial society has been sustained with a certain urgency,

as evidenced by the tenor of works of cultural production coming out of the continent today.

African literature and cinema are deployed as sites for the expression of the dire need to bridge the gaping gulf between the pre-independence utopian discourse articulated by nationalist leaders and contemporary realities. It is important to note that African writers and filmmakers generally do not explore the utopian motif as a technique for reconceptualizing their societies.<sup>2</sup> Unlike their western precursors, they prefer dealing directly with the problems of their societies instead of imagining utopian ones, as did utopianists such as Sir Thomas Moore (*Utopia*), Francis Bacon (*New Atlantis*) or Tommaso Capenella (*The City of the Sun*). In *Saaraba* (Utopia) Seck draws on traditional Wolof mythology in which Saaraba is the equivalent of Utopia but does not engage in a folkloristic representation of a Negritudist African paradise to underscore the need for change. Keeping in focus the double meaning of Utopia: "the good place" (eutopia) and "no place" (outopia), Seck carefully avoids any contradiction between his social realism and the potential anti-realism of Utopia. The structure of the film speaks to the filmmaker's intent on anchoring his film in reality even as he deals with the topos of Utopia. Perhaps to underscore the inexistence of such a world, there are no shots of the earthly paradise the characters are talking about: viewers only hear about the mythical place called Saaraba. However, the discussion of Saaraba brings into sharp relief the dysfunctions of contemporary Senegalese society. In fact, as Frank Ukadike has noted, Seck uses the utopian motif to "...demystify the illusions of post-independence Africa..." (1994:274). Seck's intention is apparent in the narrative technique of the film as he shows viewers the two faces of Dakar that poignantly highlight the contrast between the dream of Utopia and the reality of Dystopia. The griot's performance of the Saaraba song is immediately followed by a shot exposing the squalor of a slum in Dakar. The shot is thus a perspicacious political statement about African urban spaces which are increasingly characterized by the juxtaposition of desperate poverty and excessive wealth.

Godwin and Taylor are right to note that one of the merits of the utopian tradition is that the "utopian impulse makes the link between political theory and practice quite explicit" (quoted in Vincent Geoghehan, 1987:37). Seck's focus on the concept of Utopia allows him to furnish interesting insights into the people's quest for an ideal

nation. In his seminal work on nation formation, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "... an imagined political community...because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them..."(1995:6). Anderson goes on to elaborate on the factors that contribute to the emergence of a national polity. Different forms of imaginations circulate within the nations "fragments," to borrow Partha Chatterjee's expression for the different members of a national community: religious, ethnic, class, political and ideological affiliations. In *Saaraba*, Seck presents people from a cross-section of Senegalese society and thus gives viewers an idea of the heterogeneity of the national territory: a parliamentarian, a businessman, a student, a mechanic, a herdsman and a Qur'anic teacher. Evidently, each of these characters has a different vision of an ideal society and each of their perspectives could be read as a representation of the various directions they would like to see their country take. In his teaching, the Qur'anic teacher emphasizes the value of prayer as the means of entering into paradise. He advises his son, Tamsir, who has just returned from France after having lived there for seventeen years, to reject the materialism of the western civilization and believe in God for a better after life:

Have you said your prayer? All God's children must pray.  
Don't follow the Europeans who idolize life on earth. Paradise  
is our only true home. I try to how the children the way to  
God but I don't know if they'll find it.<sup>3</sup>

He thus advocates the consolidation of a nation built on the precepts of Islam, a logical proposition considering that about 90% of the people of Senegal are Muslims. His theocentric approach to national survival is in sharp contrast with Demba's (the mechanic who spends all his time repairing the old rickety motor cycle to take him to Saaraba) humanist approach towards the establishment of the ideal society. According to Demba, human beings are at the center of an ideal nation: "Man needs his fellow man. If you fight for humanity and for your fellow man you will go to Saaraba," he tells Tamsir at the moment of his death.

The griot projects a traditional and secular vision of Utopia. For him, Saaraba is an earthly paradise located in Senegal and not in a far away land: "It's a traditional village. Everyday is a day of celebration in Saaraba. If you haven't been to Saaraba you've never

been happy. If you've got money and want to celebrate go to Saaraba. It's in a village called Sabach Sandial." The felicity of the traditional society the griot describes is a foil to the turmoil and corruption of the rapidly westernizing urban areas. There is however an element in his description suggesting that even this indigenous paradisiacal space has been spoiled by western modernity. The economy of happiness is predicated on the possession of money, a real departure from the native way of life. Money has become crucial, not only as a means of survival but also as the regulator of social relations in contemporary society. "Money opens every door," as Mr. Fall, Tamsir's uncle, ostensibly points out.

Seck explores a third vision of Utopia that is deeply rooted in the Eurocentrism of colonialist ideology. In the discourse of colonialism, non-European parts of the world were presented as inherently backwards with no veneer of civilization and as such these spaces needed to be elevated to the level of western culture and civilization. Despite oppositional discourses in Africa, Asia and the Antilles to rehabilitate their values, indigenous structures and way of life, Europe has remained a dreamland in the minds of many a colonial subject. Due to the idealistic depiction of the metropolis as the center of civilization and progress, it has a certain magnetic force for the postcolonial subject whose ultimate goal is a sojourn in the legendary center. In *Black Skin, Whites Masks*, Frantz Fanon offers an epigrammatic appraisal of the dynamics of the colonial subject's fascination with France.

The black man who arrives in France changes because to him the country represents the Tabernacle; he changes not only because it is from France that he received his knowledge of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire, but also because France gave him physicians, his department heads, his innumerable functionaries—from the sergeant-major "fifteen years in the service" to the police man who was born in Parnissières. There is a kind of magic vault of distance, and the man who is leaving next week for France creates around him a magic circle in which the words Paris, Marseille, Sorbonne, Pigalle become the keys to the vault... In the eyes of those who have come to see him he can read the evidence of his own mutation, his power (1967:23)

It's been said that "places are socially constructed and that this construction is about power" (Sarup, 1994:96). The elevation of the metropolis to a land of pilgrimage is inscribed in the discourse of power between the colonizers and the colonized. The colonized subject is attracted to France because s/he perceives it as the center of the dominant culture and power. The vision of Europe as a utopian space in the African imaginary is well depicted in African literature. Ferdinand Oyono's *Chemin d'Europe* (1960) Ake Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir*, (1962) and Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1964) are noteworthy examples. For the protagonist of Loba's novel, Paris is synonymous with Utopia prior to going there:

Another world which glowed with miracles, a land of happiness [...] a picture of a world where people worked very little, where everyone owned his own brightly colored villa, surrounded by gardens and flowers throughout the year; it was a world of large marble avenues suffused with the sound of suave music day and night (my translation).<sup>4</sup>

[Un autre monde où scintillaient des miracles, où résidait le bonheur[...] l'image d'un monde où l'on travaillait peu, où chacun possédait sa propre villa aux couleurs éclatantes, entourée de grands jardins en fleurs durant toute l'année; c'étaient de grandes avenues de marbre; le long de celles-ci, on entendait nuit et jour des musiques suaves (1962:31)]

Some of the characters in *Saaraba* display this fascination with an imaginary European Eldorado. This attitude is noticeable in the businessman whose pride in having contracts with foreign firms shows his preference for Europe. Although there are a lot of tourist sites in Africa, he intends to spend his vacation on the French Riviera. Knowing the magnetic force of Europe in the imagination of Senegalese youth, he promises a young girl a trip to the Côte d'Azur as a bait to win her love. Even Sidy, the radical student wearing dreadlocks like a Rastafarian, in his frustration with the state of his country, turns his back on it. He elects to return to France to realize his dreams of a better life. But his choice of France is ironical considering that one of the reasons he is so bitter against his society is the system of capitalist exploitation. He escapes from a developing capitalist society to an advanced one, thus emphasizing his entrapment

in the hierarchy of the imposed global economic system. Sidy's reaction, no doubt, is a reflection of a postcolonial mindset still seduced by the idea of France as a utopian space. Demba's fixation with the idea of a utopian western world is the most obsessive of all. Having learned a great deal about France through the white priest and photographs, his ultimate dream, like that of many postcolonial subjects, is to go to the metropolis. From his interactions with the priest he has come to view France as: "A dreamland. A country where machines work for people. A country where machines produce all sorts of things." In short, in his imagination France is a "mechanized fairyland" (Malraux, 1984:31). Tamsir, who has just returned from Paris, cautions him an unbridled romantic vision of the metropolis:

I know the place, I lived there for 17 years. In reality, it's the people who work for the machines. I hope it's not the place you mean. *Saaraba is a figment of your imagination* (my emphasis).

After spending nearly two decades in France, Tamsir returns home disillusioned. He has learned, first hand, that France is a far cry from the technological paradise Demba is dreaming about. In an unveiled critique of the exploitative nature of advanced technological capitalism, he corrects Demba's erroneous belief that the machines work for people. Implicit in this observation is an allusion to the enslavement of labor in industrial capitalist economies. It is a cautionary note against a facile and uncritical embrace of technological instrumentalities as the ultimate means towards a better life. In embracing industrialization as the path towards development in postcolonial societies the people must not lose sight of the fact that it is a deeply problematic process. Although industries produce goods and create jobs, experience has shown, especially in Third World countries, that they do not necessarily improve the lives of the people. However, Demba's fascination with western technology is by no means a case of mistaken priorities in the quest for a better life. Through Demba, Seck underscores the centrality of western technology in the development process in Senegal and other developing countries. One of the most obvious indices of the level of French and European influence on the process of nation building in Senegal is the western nature of development plans.

## Transgressions

Earlier on, I pointed out that the multiple visions people have of their nations do not necessarily coincide. This disjunction is made obvious through the conflict between the parliamentarian and the peasants in *Saaraba*. His development package for the modernization of the village is not greeted with the enthusiasm he had expected:

I want to tell you that the electricity network is progressing as well as the water supply installations and the sewage system. After the construction is concluded, a salt factory and a tourist center will be built here.

Through the modernization of the village space, the parliamentarian hopes to stem rural exodus and thus correct one of the legacies of colonialism in Senegal and other parts of Africa: the rapid urbanization of a few cities which attract youths in search of an easier and more glamorous life-style. For many, the city is a dreamland of opportunities, a place of escape from the rigors of rural life. According to the parliamentarian, this need not be the case and he decides to turn things around by making the village more attractive: "Your children will come back from the city. There will be plenty here for them."

There is, however, a clear discrepancy between his vision of a better life and that of his constituency. While he sees the modernization of the rural areas as a means of improving the living conditions of the people, the villagers for their part prefer the traditional way of life and want to preserve it. In envisioning the above project, the parliamentarian enjoins the villagers to transcend the parochial confines of their traditional society and embrace western modernity. Alpha Yoro, arguably the spokesman for the villagers, voices what Homi Bhabha has described as "the anxiety of enjoining the global and the local" (1992:216). The parliamentarian is projecting the concept of a global modernity on the village space and the people are worried about the disappearance of their traditional life style. "If the town sets up a salt factory here what will become of my herd, my only possession?" he asks. As we can see from the villagers' predicament, "the status of 'native' is a nervous condition..." (Sartre:1963:28) in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. The clash of visions is

symptomatic of the tensions created by the problematic transformation of rural spaces in postcolonial Africa. The inevitability of this reconfiguration vividly calls to mind Karl Marx's assertion in *Grundrisse* that modern history is characterized by the inexorable "urbanization of the countryside..." (1984:110).<sup>5</sup> And in the case of postcolonial societies, urbanization, as we can gather from the government official's project, is synonymous with modernization.

The peasants resist modernization not only because it endangers their way of life but also because it does not, in their view, offer a satisfactory alternative. They believe that modernization has sown the seeds of transgressive behavior. As one of the peasants puts it, "modern times have led us toward the diabolical path." Seck's unflattering portrayal of the urban youth casts a harsh light on the problems of city life. Their involvement in drugs, alcohol and prostitution is a symptom of both their alienation from, and disillusionment with, postcolonial society. Although it is simplistic to claim that this kind of deviant behavior was unknown in traditional societies, as African writers such as René Philombe have disingenuously suggested, the contact with the West and the ensuing pressures of change have certainly aggravated it.<sup>6</sup>

There is no denying that Third World nations only "achieved a simulacrum of phony independence"(Sartre, 1963:10). As in the colonial era, these regions are still under the control of the erstwhile colonial powers and freedom is only an illusion. The New World order of the postcolonial and Cold War eras led by the United States of America is, for many Third World citizens, a euphemism for the ubiquitous presence of neocolonial forces in their territories. Tamsir complains about the ubiquity of western hegemony and the postcolonial subject's lack of agency: "The white man puts out the direction and others must follow. Even to take a breath, you must take his permission." He underscores the fact that, despite Senegal's status as an independent nation, the country is still micro-managed by omnipresent neocolonial powers. Senegal, then, is just a postcolony.

If the western domination of the globe denies the postcolonial subject any form of agency, this is reinforced by the structure of power in the postcolony. Contemporary African governments establish their legitimacy not through consensus but coercion. *Saaraba* gives us a sense of this style of autocratic rule

through the parliamentarian's interaction with the villagers. In *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers*, Aurel Kolnai posits that there is a nexus between totalitarian rule and the quest for Utopia:

Totalitarianism is no doubt erected on utopian foundations; but seeing that its workings are utterly repulsive, while utopian pictures of bliss are, by definition, attractive-should we not conclude that tyranny expresses Utopia "gone wrong" perhaps betrayed and forsaken- or, in other words, that totalitarianism is utopianism misapplied?(1995:4)

There is certainly a ring of Kolnai's statement in the parliamentarian's approach to the development of the village. His development project, which is partly prompted by the drought, is done with the good of the people in mind. He so firmly believes in the soundness of the project that he is going to implement it at all cost. Although there is no doubt that his development plan for the village would improve the lives of the people, he undermines the legitimacy of the project by refusing to engage in a constructive dialogue with them to win their support because he sees himself as having the last word. "You're only an MP. They elected you to work for their interests," his friend, Mr. Fall tells him. To which he replies, "That's just it. Their land has become uneconomical. I am offering them new opportunities. *Nobody can stop me from realizing this project*" (my emphasis). He fails to understand, as Adedeji Adebayo has pertinently noted, that, "the democratization of the development process-by which we mean, the empowerment of the people, their involvement in decision making and implementation -is the *sine qua non* for socio-economic recovery and transformation"(quoted in *California Newsreel*, 1993:2). The parliamentarian, a member of the hegemonic group, thus comes across as a postcolonial autocrat acting as a surrogate of the erstwhile colonial power. His project is viewed as an assault on their life-style, a transgression of their native space.

From the public sphere, Seck moves his camera to the private sphere of the family where viewers are given further insights into the impact of colonialism on the traditional paradigm of society. The rationality behind certain traditional values is seriously put into question as a deep generational fault-line separates parents and their children, who view the world through different lenses. The younger generation questions the legitimacy of certain aspects of tradition

which in Tamsir's words are "stifling at times." One of the most contentious issues of discord between the younger and older generations in Africa today is the choice of marriage partners. Writing about marriage in western societies, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that: "The constraints surrounding matrimonial choice are so tremendous and appear in such complex combinations that the individuals involved cannot possibly deal with them consciously, even if they have mastered them on a different level" (1976:141). In Senegal as well as other African societies these "constraints" are far more stringent than in western societies due to the strong influence of gerontocratic traditions that demand children's unquestioning submission to the will of their parents and elders in society. Seck takes up the question of parental intervention in the choice of marriage partners for their off-spring. Damba is frustrated by her parents' objection to her marriage to Thiam, a young man she is very much in love with, because of his family background. When Tamsir returns home from France, he renews his relationship with his childhood girlfriend, Lissa, and both decide to get married. But Lissa's parents have other marital plans for her: their eyes are set on the wealthy parliamentarian, a choice Lissa categorically turns down. The disagreement between Lissa and her parents over the choice of her husband exemplifies the new kinds of family crisis arising from the penetration of western culture into the matrix of the traditional socio-cultural system.

Seck does not present Lissa as a recalcitrant daughter, but as a young woman who is respectful of her parents and tradition. "I will always obey my parents", she tells Tamsir. In keeping with tradition, she is determined not to breach the taboo against premarital sex even though Tamsir thinks the concept is "outmoded." Lissa only rebels when her parents insist that she marry a rich man for whom she has no affection at all. She does not only defy her parents and tradition by rejecting their choice of a husband but also deals a big blow to her family's pride by getting pregnant. In transgressing the traditional custom of arranged marriages, Lissa at once asserts her individuality and emphatically objects to over-reaching parental control.

Sidy's challenge of his father's integrity is another telling example of the ways in which the younger generation is subverting traditional norms in their relationship with their parents. His valedictory letter is a sharp rebuke of his father for his irresponsible behavior:

In this farewell letter, I want to speak openly to you. *So forgive me for breaching traditional rules of conduct.* I know a father must be an example to his children. You have fulfilled your duties to your family... But with your position in society you could have fought for the poor and the victims of injustice. How could their misery leave you indifferent? I know about all your shady deals. Leave those satanical activities and fight for your people. Stop embezzling the foreign donations of those in need. Only this way can you restore the honor of your family (emphasis mine).

Sidy's critique of his father is an acerbic indictment of the entire postcolonial Senegalese elite whose greed has led to the continuous pauperization and marginalization of the vast majority of their people. The young man's disavowal of traditional rules of conduct to openly criticize his father is driven by the conviction that the progress of his society must be predicated on the simultaneous abandonment of certain retrogressive aspects of traditional culture and the purging of government institutions of all forms of graft. In his reaction against his father's transgressions in society, Sidy blurs the lines between private and public responsibility and underscores the need for strong and honest leadership. Although his father has played his role as the head of the family, he stands as a poor example in the community since he has abdicated his responsibilities vis-à-vis the larger community.

In his presentation of these transgressions, Seck gives us a glimpse of some of the shifts in world views and value systems that have occurred in African societies since they came in contact with western culture and civilization. It is important to note that the challenge of tradition does not suggest a desire for a total abandonment of indigenous structures, schemas, habits and way of life. Rather, it is indicative of the need for a reassessment of our cultural practices in view of the emergence of a space in which local and foreign cultures interact productively and hybridize.

### **Hybridity**

Postcolonial African nations are necessarily hybrid cultural spaces. Although this is true of nations in general, it is especially so

in the case of formerly colonized nations due to the circumstances of their creation. First, they were created by imperial powers without regard to the ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious backgrounds of the disparate groups of people that were artificially brought together for administrative convenience. Second, these nations borrowed from different models of European statehood for their governance. The cultural spaces of these nations are thus sites of pastiche and amalgams of indigenous and western cultural forms. The formation of hybrid identities is accentuated by the continuous intersection of First and Third World spaces.

Michel de Certeau has observed that "life consists of constantly crossing borders" (quoted in Canclini, 1995:232). Thanks to advanced communicational technologies that shrink geographical distances these border crossings have become extremely frequent and instantaneous. In the film a group of young Senegalese are glued to their television set watching the tour de France. From the intimacy of their living room, they are able view images from afar and comment on them as if they were on the spot. They cross their national borders without realizing it. The Senegalese are thus increasingly inhabiting the international space of the global community in which cultures are interactive.

Perhaps due to the ubiquity of western cultural forms in contemporary African societies and other non-European areas of the world, discussions of the phenomenon of hybridity in Africa tend to focus mostly on the intermingling of European and native cultures. It is my contention that this exogenous approach to cultural mixtures is flawed, for the nature and texture of the ongoing process of cultural syncretism in Africa cannot be fully appreciated without taking account of endogenous hybridity in the black world; that is the rich exchanges between diverse black cultures. In other words, using the western/non-western paradigm as the sole basis for assessing the level of hybridization in African cultures precludes a discursive space for the dialogue of black cultures across the Atlantic.

The prevalence of Caribbean and African-American cultural forms on the continent is evidence of the interaction and blending of different black cultures. There are several levels on which this black-black cultural interchange is manifested: language, literature, art, sculpture, dance, dress and popular music, to mention the most obvious. The musical scene in Senegal today is replete with the sounds of zouk, reggae, rap and other forms of black music from the Caribbean

and the US. These musical forms are simultaneously enjoyed in their original forms and reinterpretations by Senegalese musicians who infuse them with the local rhythms; hence we have, for instance, "Senegalese reggae" or "Senegalese Rap." A recent article in *Yegoo*, "a magazine for intercultural exchange" published in Senegal, discusses the popularity of rap among Senegalese youth and the explosion of rap groups in the country during the last five years.<sup>7</sup>

The urban youth in *Saaraba* are avid fans of reggae music and other expressions of Rastafari. Their cultural icons are reggae artists such as Bob Marley and Burning Spear whose giant posters cover their walls. This fascination with prominent Rastafari has important social and political ramifications. Reggae music, an important vehicle for the dissemination of Rastafari discourse, has a strong appeal among the youths due the social relevance of its lyrics. The ideas of "egalitarianism, Ethiopianism, and anti-imperialism" (Gilroy, 1991:171) contained in the lyrics profoundly appeal to the Blacks and other marginalized groups all over the world. Linton Kwesi's characterization of how reggae rhythms capture the reality of Jamaican society invokes the image of Senegal or just any postcolonial Third World society: "The sounds of reggae are the sounds of a society in the process of transformation, a society undergoing profound political and historical change"(1976:589). Sidy's critique of capitalist exploitation and social injustice in the film is a leitmotif in reggae lyrics. His outburst against the capitalist system calls to mind Bob Andy's critique of social injustice under capitalism when he sang that:

"This couldn't be my home,  
It must be somewhere else,  
Can't get no clothes to wear,  
Can't get no food to eat,  
Can't get a job to get bread,  
That's why I've got to go back home" (quoted in Campbell, 1994:135)

In her study of Rastafari as a social movement across the Atlantic, Anna Marie Smith(1994) discusses how black communities in the Caribbean, Europe, North America and Africa have appropriated the precepts of Rastafari both as a vehicle for the resistance of all forms of oppression and for the revalorization of blackness. Rastafari

discourse has a special resonance in the black world not only because of its revolutionary message but also because of its treatment of certain aspects of the people's history. Indeed, for Blacks in the mainland and the Diaspora, listening to reggae music and the use of other expressions of Rastafari is at once a celebration of black history and culture and a reawakening of black consciousness. Tamsir's desire to "... get away from the white man's civilization and return to our roots" is reminiscent of both the Negritude philosophy of the return to the sources and the Rastafari "journey to Jah" which is "a turning away from white western influences"(Smith, 1994:213). In *Saaraba*, Seck thus projects a space in which transnational black cultural forms of expressions are deployed. The mobilization of such a space, it seems to me, is crucial for the success of a global struggle against neocolonialism.

Film critics have drawn attention to the role of music as a narrative agent. Kathryn Kalinak argues that "cinematic narrative is not constructed by visual means alone..." and that, "music works as part of the process that transmits narrative information to the spectator"(1992:30). Ousmane Sembène had many years earlier discussed the role of music as a narrative agent in African films. He observed that unlike European cinema, music in African films always carries a special message. The music in *Saaraba* significantly helps in highlighting and anchoring the issues the film raises. It very well reflects the multicultural texture of the society, as the camera shuttles between the urban and rural milieux. The performances of the two versions of the saaraba song is indicative of the process of hybridization. In one close-up, the village griot plays the song with the kora and in another, an orchestra performs it in a modern nightclub using both African and European musical instruments. While the griot's rhythm is clearly traditional, the orchestra version is difficult to pigeonhole. It is neither traditional nor modern. The music thus offers a good example of the ongoing process of what Françoise Lionnet has called the "mongrelization or [a] metissage of cultural forms"(1993:102).

From the above it is apparent that the western cultural project aimed at undermining so-called peripheral cultural traditions has by and large not been totally successful. Indigenous cultures are too resilient to be swept away by the unremitting western cultural invasion. Due to their resilience in the face of the aggressive western cultural imperialism, "double lives are led in the postcolonial world"(Bhabha,

1992:213). Despite their embrace of western cultural forms, postcolonial subjects have remained anchored in their traditional roots. They lead a schizophrenic existence whose duplicity they often exploit due to their ability to shuttle between both cultures according to the imperatives of particular circumstances. *Saaraba* illustrates the cultural schizophrenia of colonized peoples and projects how the colonialist effort to acculturate the colonial subjects and spaces produces syncretic identities. Seck's use of ethnographical cultural markers such as dress, hair styles, music and dance in the film contributes to the representation of a hybrid society and thus challenges the simplistic and monolithic representations of African societies common in western discourse.

Naturally, personal identity too is conditioned by the inescapable process of hybridity. Tamsir returns home to reconnect with his native milieu. But he finds a society that is undergoing irreversible changes because, as he remarks to his father, "the technology of the white man seems to be inseparable from our day and age." In talking about the inextricability of European technology from his world, Tamsir makes two important points. First, he subverts the anthropological vision of his society as non-technological, since the use of technology has become an integral part of life. Second, since technology comes with a cultural baggage, he also points to the ubiquitous presence of western culture in his society.

Tamsir's father advises him that due to the mutations and complexity of the contemporary world, he (Tamsir) should not uncritically base his *Weltanschauung* on tradition. The old man urges his son to live with the times:

Father: The world has become so complicated we don't know which way to turn. That's why it's better to resemble ones day and age rather than ones father.

Tamsir: But father you always said it's important to know one's tradition.

Father: Yes. But no matter how much you inherit from your father you'll never be like him.

Tamsir's father's comment about the impossibility of an offspring to be the replica of his or her father is at once truistic and illuminating. It is a double-edged statement in which Seck affirms the postcolonial subject's positionality and challenges the paternalistic assimilationist

cultural agenda of colonialism which putatively sets out to refashion indigenous peoples in the image of the West. Even Africans with a western education cannot be fully assimilated despite sustained attempts to do so. The project of total assimilation is thus a fiction of colonialism. Similarly, the cultural purity of colonized peoples and societies is impossible to maintain in the present context of cultural interaction and a return to authentic traditional roots, as Tamsir tried to do, is a futile quest in the postcolonial world.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued that through its social realism, Seck's film draws attention to important issues that underlie the dynamics of the postcolonial condition. The film demonstrates that postcolonial Senegal is driven by transgressive and transformative energies fueled by the infusion and fusion of different ideas from the colonial encounter. Although this process of transformation cannot be entirely reduced to the infiltration of foreign values since every culture possesses an internal dynamic of change and regeneration, it could also be plausibly argued that change in the world of the film is accelerated by external forces. Those who have spent time abroad are often expected to have a more progressive outlook on their society due to their exposure to novel ideas. For instance, in telling Tamsir about her disappointment with her parents' objection to her marriage to Thiam, Damba expects Tamsir to sympathize with her since he has been to France where parental control in such matters is comparatively minimal. But to her dismay his perspective on the issue has apparently not been affected by his stay in France. He advises her to respect tradition: "Those are the rules of our ancestors. We must act according to them... White people have influenced us and their ways confuse us." To which she responds: "You have learned nothing abroad. You are just like your mother." It is important to point out that Tamsir's defense of tradition is contradictory considering that he had told Lissa that certain traditions are untenable. His conflicted position is a good example of the contradictions inherent in the life of postcolonial subjects as they dangle between two worlds.

The growing need to abandon the old paradigm of society for a new one is expressed by breaches of traditional conduct. Hybridity, the intermingling of cultures is, in some ways, a form of resistance against the complete reinvention of the society. It serves

as a here-and-now strategy that allows the people to make use of what is at their disposal on their own terms and thus moves them from a position of powerlessness to one of agency.

In his deployment of the utopian motif, Seck underscores its relevance in the post-colonial context: it simultaneously highlights the prevalent feeling of despair and disillusionment from the unfulfilled utopian promises of the pre-independence era and brings into sharper focus the dreams and aspirations of the people and the need to fix the social, economic and political structures of the country. Demba's dogged determination to repair the rickety motor cycle could be read as a metaphor for the need to fix the Senegalese social and political machine in disrepair. His effort underscores the need for action although it is undermined by its solitary and self-serving nature.

Towards the end of the film, thanks to a long shot of an aerial view of Dakar, the most westernized space in the country which metonymically stands for the metropolis, it is clear that the city is Demba's destination. He is killed in a motor cycle accident before he gets to his so-called terrestrial paradise. Why does Demba fail to reach his destination? An interesting subtext underlies the filmmaker's presentation of Demba's approach to realizing his utopian dreams. The film seems to suggest that his approach is misguided because it is both selfish and escapist. Utopia is a concept, not a place, and it is incumbent on the members of a community to collectively create their ideal space. The path towards the emergence of a better post-independent nation is not an escapist one like Demba's. It is rather through the collective participation of all Senegalese in the task of national construction that the dreams of a "utopian" postcolonial national community can become reality.

### Notes

1. Sembène Ousmane made this point in an undated interview with Mineka Schipper.
2. African writers and filmmakers actively engaged in the reconstruction of their societies have made it a point to highlight the dystopian features of their societies as a strategy to bring about reform. Ali Mazrui's lone novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1978), is to my knowledge, the only work by an African writer in which the trope of Utopia is used as a technique for changing the debilitating realities of postcolonial Africa. Mazrui sharply criticizes contemporary social

and political institutions through his depiction of a fictional perfect African State called After Africa.

3. The film is in Wolof with English subtitles. Quotations from the film are my transcription of the subtitles. *Saaraba* (Senegal, 1986, 86 minutes) is obtainable from California Newsreel, 149 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.

4. All translations are mine except otherwise stated.

5. Marx frames his discussion in light of the conflict between civilization and primitivism: "The antagonism between town and country begins with the transition from barbarism to civilization, from tribe to State, from locality to nation, and runs through the whole history of civilization to the present day"(43).

6. Many postcolonial writers and critics have pointedly blamed the erosion and the crumbling of indigenous values in postcolonial societies on the cultural invasion of the West. René Philombe, a Cameroonian poet and playwright, for instance, makes this point with poignant directness in his poem "Civilisation." The voice in the poem recounts how he was living blissfully in his pristine "tenebres saines" (healthy darkness) prior to the arrival of the Europeans. When they arrived with the cultural agenda of taking away his jungle status, they injected him with an array of vices:

....and avarice  
and alcoholism  
and incest  
and prostitution  
and fratricidal politics

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[...et l'avarice  
et l'alcoolisme  
et l'inceste  
et la prostitution  
et la politique fratricide...](1963:6)

7. See Moustapha Diallo, "Le RAP au Sénégal, entre "peace and love" et "hardcore" [Senegalese Rap: between peace and love and hardcore] in *Yegoo No O* (Nov. 2000) p.7. He writes, "Rap is simply their passion, in fact their reason for living... In the space of a few years, there has an explosion of Senegalese Rap groups. In 1995, the number of groups that were formed was estimated to be between 3000 and 4000. These groups were often created with no means other than their dreams."

[Le rap c'est tout simplement leur passion, voire leur raison d'existence...En quelques années, les groupes de rap sénégalais ont foisonné. En 1995, on estimait entre 3000 et 4000 le nombre de groupes qui s'étaient créés, le plus souvent sans autres moyens que leur rêves] p. 7

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