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Oedipus, Enemy Brothers and the Sacrificial Crisis<sup>1</sup>  
African Cinema and New Forms of Orality

In most of their studies, Manthias Diawara, Nwachucku Frank Ukadike and many other researchers have associated the specificity of African cinema with traditional African literatures, otherwise called orality. Diawara for example compares the filmmaker to the traditional bard, “looking particularly at their reproduction of traditional modes of being, so as to show similarities and differences between their work”. The comparison also examines how well filmmakers import “oral storytelling forms” (Diawara 210) and popular culture in films in order to create an effect of real. For the critic and the artist, the task is then very challenging as he also states:

[t]o analyze African cinema, one must first understand that twenty-five years of film production has necessarily created an aesthetic tradition which African film-makers use as a point of reference which they follow or contest. An African aesthetic does not come merely from European cinema. To avoid making African cinema into an imperfect appendix to European cinema, one must question Africa itself, and African traditions, to discover the originality of its films (1996: 209-210)

But there is a fact about Diawara’s views. Although it is quite relevant, this perception of specificity which is actually inspired from various studies of literature is only so for a certain number of films, especially those addressed in his typology: the “quest for social and economic justice” as mostly illustrated in social realist films, the search for identity in “return to the source” films and the recovering of mutilated African histories that is central to “confrontation” films (*African Cinema* 164). If one adds

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Sembene Ousmane's contention that the African artist is a griot in his commitment to challenge social evils, it becomes clear, in view of the recent productions in African cinema that this perception of orality can appear to be reductionnist in at least two ways. The first, as indicated by Eileen Julien (1992), is that there is probably something ontologically oral about Africa, a consideration that would dangerously allow orality to become a metonymy for Africa. The second is another kind of essentialism which would imply that African filmmakers, has only listened to African tales. This would imply that only these traditional narratives can influence their productions.

But the truth is that most of post 1990 films do not seem to fit very well into this perception of orality. Yet, there are several oral characteristics in these films that may not necessarily challenge Diawara or Ousmane's perceptions, but bring in non-African oral narratives or genres, particularly classical myths and tragedies. Although films like *La Genèse* (Cheick Oumar Cissoko, Mali, 1999), *Ndeysaan, The Price of Forgiveness* (Mansour Sora Wade, Senegal, 2001), *Adanggaman* (Roger Ngoan M'Balla, Cote d'Ivoire, 2000), *Tilai* (1991) and *La Colère des Dieux* (Idrissa Ouedraogo, Burkina Faso, 2003) are African with regard to their cultural and political discourse, they also reveal some interesting links with myths and tragedies that moves the discourse on orality to a somehow universal level while remaining African. Persistent uncontrolled Oedipal conflicts generated "because of women" and hatred between brothers that are reminiscent of the Biblical conflict of Cain and Abel are the main constructions that appear in most of these films. They seem to fall within the canons of tragic narratives to describe a world of chaos, violence and destruction where, in Etienne Souriau's words, "toute action où l'enchaînement des situations montre une marche fatale du microcosme central vers son

propre anéantissement” (Souriau 54). But by incorporating forms of the Oedipus complex and enemy brothers, how can myth and tragedy be used to interpret African cinema, especially today? Is myth even African and is it at home in film? If so, how?

In *Oral Literature in Africa*, Ruth Finegan’s make a very strange statement that although it has been long challenged, needs to be repeated here:

Radin’s remark in 1952 that cosmological myths are rare in Africa compared to their significance among, say, the Polynesians or American Indians has not been validated by evidence produced since then. And one could go further and say that myths in any strict sense do not seem, on the evidence we have, to be a characteristic of African form at all (362)

This statement clearly means that certain categories are very un-African, in the same way, as certain critics tend to imply that orality is specifically African. But among the benefits of exposure to western education and the current most threatening globalization is the fact that they can allow artists to borrow from various cultural landscapes as was already the case with the avant-gardist Djibril Diop Mambety who adapted a Swiss author to the screen, or of Joseph Gaye Ramaka who came up with *Karmen Guei*, an African version of Carmen. It is also true of Idirissa Ouedraogo who, after the release of his film *Tilai*, made the following comment: “I hadn’t realized it, but it is a Greek tragedy” (Barlet, 63). This clearly indicates that imagination is transnational and transcultural, that its scope is unlimited. This is particularly true of the myth, as long indicated by Isidore Okpewho:

One interesting point about the mythic imagination is its tendency to appropriate material from wherever it may come, and perhaps the greatest boon to the oral tradition is the way it has transcended its own culture and swelled its repertory with material from the literate culture that steadily threatens to overtake it (110)

It is within this framework that my presentation will examine how some African films construct tragic narratives that illustrate or challenge some foundational myths, especially the myth of Oedipus and the biblical Cain and Abel. By involving ungovernable sons, doomed princes, enemy brothers and oracles whose knowledge mainly help forecast an evil that generates an absolute chaos and, especially, by linking every conflict with the an uncontrollable male desire to possess a sometimes rebellious woman, African directors seem to focus on new forms of orality to reveal the misfortune of families in deep crisis.

In his seminal study *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon indicates very categorically that because Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts never considered any African in their research, their findings about the Oedipus complex would never apply to them (151). He writes that whether people want to believe it or not, the Oedipus myth is not close to applying to children. But he also states a few pages earlier:

There are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation. Militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence on the authority of the father. In Europe and in every country characterized as civilized or civilizing, the family is a miniature of the nation. As the child emerges from the shadow of his parents, he finds himself once more among the same laws, the same principles, the same values. [...] There is on disproportion between the life of the family and the life of the nation. Conversely, when one examines a closed society – that is, a society that has been protected from the flood of civilization – one encounters the same structures as those just described (141-142)

This statement is more political and does not exclude Africans from certain theoretical frameworks. It can shed more light on the understanding of the relationship between human beings, irrespective of the colour of their skin or experience. This is particularly

relevant for the films I have considered for this presentation. They involve many conflicts between the central male character and his father. These conflicts, which all result into struggles, revenge and death reveal the centrality of tragedy in African experience. That is the case with *Tilai* where *Saga*, the main character openly challenges his father's will.

After a two-year absence from the village, Saga comes back from the city just to realize that his father has got married to Nogma, the very fiancée he had promised Saga. In fact, Nogma is forced to marry this old man. Saga feels betrayed and decides to leave the village and settle at its periphery. Nogma regularly meets him at his hut and is seen by some villagers who report back to the community, to the dismay of her family. According to the local tradition, Saga's involvement, which is considered incest, as it is metaphorically one, has to be punished. A ritual is organized in order to determine who will render the justice, a justice that consists in killing the offender. Kougri, Saga's brother is randomly selected to do that but instead of killing his brother as required, he wounds himself and allows him to run away.

But when Saga hears that his mother is dying, he decides to come back in spite of the fact that he had promised his brother who saved his life never to return. He is normally considered dead. When villagers see him, they are scared and run away, thinking that it is his ghost, until they realise that Kougri, the chosen dispenser of justice, did not perform his duty towards the community to which he belongs. He feels betrayed and simply kills Saga with the gun he was carrying.

This example in *Tilai* with the suffering and the tragic destruction of the cultural order is very reminiscent of the Oedipus cycle, which is a central topos of many tragedies. By opposing his father, Saga refuses to bargain his way into an oppressive

society that controls and channels desire. By helping his brother run away, Kougri tries to solve his personal dilemma after the incest that has been committed by his brother. As he says himself, he is torn between the competing rights of his brother and his father. That adds to the sympathy he has for Nogma, his brother's ex-fiancée who has now become his mother after being forced to marry his father. The tragic lies in the conflicting situation that does not allow the son to ever challenge his father in a community where respect for elders, parents and local cultures is an obligation.

On another front, it is clear from the film that Nomenaba, Saga's father, can forgive his banned son after he runs away, but as he says it to his wife, that can only happen if Saga makes the first step. The matter is more than that of a "criminal" incest: it is a matter of honor and respect for authority. Tenga, Nogma's father commits suicide. His daughter not only dares disobey by challenging a choice he makes for her, but also causes dishonor in the community and humiliates him by sleeping with a banned son. Although the crisis in the community is about something as simple as a marriage, it is the metaphor of a more profound issue: that of desire and power, which are at the source of many tragic narratives where death is usually the only resolution. From tragic death may come new life or order, but in any case, Saga's destiny, whose love transform him into a rival in his father's eye, shows that the absolute desire to control or to satisfy one's wishes is a tragic curse in many modern societies. By making love to Nogma, Saga causes a major transgression, which illustrates this point by Terry Eagleton for whom desire is nothing personal: it is an affliction which was lying in wait for us at the outset, a perversion into which we were plunged almost from birth. What makes us human subjects is this foreign body lodged inside us, which invades our flesh like a lethal virus

and yet which [...] is closer to us than we are we are to ourselves. Since desire in psychoanalytic thought is always bound up with death, a death which the lack at the heart of desire prefigures, not to give up one's desire means to maintain [...] a constant relation to death, confronting the lack of being that one is. (233)

But as Eagleton also indicates in his book *Sweet Violence*, “In the modern era, mythical destiny shows its face again in the guise of vast, anonymous forces – language, Will, power, history, production, desire – which live us far more than we live them” (206). That fatality is particularly true of *Tilai* where all these elements interact to generate conflicts in a quiet contemporary African society. But one considers *Adanggaman* and especially *La Colère des dieux*, the transgression that creates chaos in the social fabric is not incest: it is a matter of free will and power control.

The dramas that happen in *Adanggaman*, set in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and *La Colère des dieux*, set in pre-colonial Africa, are quite indicative of Fanon's parallel between the political and the family structure in every society. The family is the exact metonymy of the state, as they reproduce the same cycle of power relations. Opposing the father or expressing free will in a conservative society is synonym to opposing the state or the social superstructure, a situation that can only result into chaos. That is precisely what happens to Ossei who refuses to marry the woman imposed to him in *Adanggaman*. In the first shots of the films, one sees an old woman lamenting about the world falling apart with children not obeying their parents anymore. Ngo, Ossei's father tells his wife that “ancient law must be obeyed” and he cannot endorse the involvement of his son with a “slave” woman simply in the name of love. He clearly tells her that it is his authority and the survival of traditional rules that are at stake.

In that respect, this film is similar to Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Tilai*. But *Adanggaman* fails to clearly establish a relationship between Ossei's refusal to marry Odjo and the slave trade being practiced in the community by king Adanggaman. Just after Ossei runs away, the slavers invade village and everybody except his mother is killed. The mass killings perpetrated by the king as well as Ossei's escape, which justify his attempts to resist slave trade, do not have a clear syntactic relationship with the refusal to marry a woman from a lower social status. The father-son rivalry that scatters the little village fighting for its survival just seems to forecast the unavoidable conflict that later ruins the community with the advent of slave trade. But in *La Colère des dieux* the opposition takes a completely different perspective.

Set in pre-colonial Africa, Idrissa Ouedraogo's film also displays the powerlessness of the father. But the difference is that contrary to the previous three films, the father, who in this case is a king, dies and is unable to prevent his ambitious son from taking over power by force. The film is a more direct reflection on tyranny, but this time being explored through a son's unquenchable thirst for political power. Tanga challenges all the rules and imposes himself to the community as new king simply because he is the commander in chief. The agonising father can do nothing but leave the matter in the hands of gods. As in ancient tragedies, a serious transgression is provoked and can only be punished by "angry gods".

But when Tanga imposes himself as king and forces Awa, the fiancée of a fellow villager, Rasmané, to marry him, he does not know that she is pregnant of a Salam, a prince who would later be revealed as illegitimate and whose death will be required by an oracle. The powerful Tanga is warned that if he doesn't kill the illegitimate Salam, he

will kill him and take up his power. That is exactly what happens and Salam, who appears to be an equal tyrant as his adoptive father Tanga, commits suicide when he realises that he has also offended the very Gods that offered him the protection he needed in fighting the despotic father. Apart from the Oedipal metaphor present in *La colere des dieux*, one can also note the issue of illegitimate power as illustrated by Neron in ancient tragedies, especially in Jean Racine's 17<sup>th</sup> century *Britannicus*.

What is interesting about these three films is that in all cases, a son's strong will has to face the authority of his father in a society where social cohesion is not compatible with individual desires. Apart from *Tilai* where Nomenaba has two sons, Ngo, Tanga's father and Tanga himself, the fathers of the others films, have only one son. The tragic suffering framework these sons undergo and the repetition of the Oedipal cycle in these narratives are indicative of the persistence of the conflict between the individual and his community and, especially, between father and son. The particular case of Tanga is reminiscent of René Girard's opinion that

Behind the pageantry of the African monarchies lurks the specter of the sacrificial crisis, suddenly resolved by the unanimity arising from the generative act of violence. Each African king is a new Oedipus, obliged to play out his own myth from beginning to end, because ritualistic theory see in this enactment the means of renewing and perpetuating a cultural order that is constantly at the brink of destruction. As in the case of Oedipus, there is a charge of incest associated with the original act of mob violence and serving its justification, an accusation seemingly confirmed by the effective results of the collective action (106)

More importantly, all these three films illustrate what is true since the Greeks: the son is always the double of the father; the father is an obstacle to be eliminated; the best or most loved son always appears to be the worst; this most loved son is the easiest door

through which misfortune enters and destabilizes the cultural order: in the Bible, it is Jacob and not Esau, it is Oedipus, it is Tanga, Salam, Saga and Ossei. In all these cases, the families, then the community, are involved in reciprocal destruction in an environment where death always occurs. But the son does not only challenge or kill his father. The brother may also be an easy target.

According to Girard, in spite of the many mythical narrative well known to everyone, we tend to be too optimistic in imagining relationship among brothers as very good. The reality is that they appear to be generally very bad and essentially violent. And in most cases, these enemy brothers are divided over some issues that can only be explained by a general economy of desire: the desire to dispossess the brother from an object. Tragedy, which is always a synonym to dispossession and not only possession, occurs because of competition and the inability or the refusal to share. As is the case with the father, the enemy (twin) brothers are both linked by what will end dividing them and generating trouble in the community. That is precisely the case in *Ndeysaan* and *La colère des dieux*.

In *Ndeysaan*, Mbanick and Yatma live in small village near the ocean where fishing is the only activity. Although they are not real brothers, they were born in the same village, at the same time and were circumcised together, which explains why they are usually referred to as brothers. They unfortunately fall in love with the same girl, Maxoye, who happens to prefer Mbanick the brave and successful fisherman. Furthermore, while the entire village rallies behind a charlatan in order to get rid of the clouds that have invaded the ocean and generated hunger as well as poverty because nobody can fish anymore, Mbanick defies the community by not attending this ceremony

that he should have normally lead because his agonizing father Baye Sogi possesses the proper knowledge to fight this misfortune. While everybody curses Mbanick, his father blesses him before dying.

But immediately after his death, the spirit of Baye Sogi is reincarnated in his son who then becomes a completely different person. He intrigues the whole village with his deviant behaviour and his Herculean strength: he talks to nobody, behaves like a mad person, buries his father alone under the village huge sacred tree. Mbanick is completely cut off from life and becomes a threat as nobody, not even Maxoye, can dare approach him. After cutting the huge sacred tree alone, he makes a pirogue out of it and sails with determination into the foggy ocean that had long terrified the village. He comes back with a boatload of fish, hence re-establishing the once lost joy and prosperity in the community. Shortly after his heroic and triumphal return, the camera quickly shows Yatma's frowning face as his best friend is being unanimously celebrated. But this is not what causes Yatma's deepest frustration.

The worst issue between both brothers is Maxoye. Their rivalry over her is first expressed through the tale of their origins. An evening, when peer village youth relax under a tree during one of the mysteriously cloudy nights, one of the youth promises the most beautiful girl of the village (the camera zooms at Maxoye when he says that) to whoever between the king of the savannah (Yatma) and the lord of the sea (Mbanick) would restore happiness and brightness in the village. On the symbolic level, this is the first confrontation between the two rivals who declaim their respective genealogies, emphasising particularly on the heroism of their respective ancestors. Bama Ndoye, Mbanick's ancestor, who was the strongest and most skilful fisherman of the region, wins

the battle in the ocean against the monster that was preventing him from attaining his prey. In fact, this monster completely gives up the battle against Bama Doye as soon as it discovers the stature of its opponent. In other words, Mbanick Ndoye is the descendent of winning fishermen and wrestlers. But although Gol Njaay, Yatma's ancestor fights a lion, the story does not say if he wins the battle. The lion hurts Yatma's ancestor and leaves a mark on his shoulder. In other words, Yatma may not have lost the battle, but it is certain that he has not won it. Although the tale clearly sets Mbanick Ndoye as the winner, Maxoye takes a joking tone and goes to congratulate Yatma, hence making Mbanick visibly jealous. He gets angry and leaves the scene.

The real conflict between the brothers is obviously because of Maxoye. After the tales, Maxoye and Mbanick meet for some romance and even make love. Like any voyeur, Yatma literally goes crazy when he sees Maxoye and Mbanick in their bedroom or when he hears their noise when making love. The director dedicates many shots to his self-mutilation: he is shown screaming in the dark, kicking the earth and hurting himself on the sand. There are a few close ups on his darkened ugly face wounded by the many hits on the sand. On his way from Maxoye's place, Yatma waits for Mbanick on the sandy land and fights then kills him. He then burns his rival's pirogue and throws his body in the ocean.

The motif of the illegitimate son occurs here again as Maxoye is pregnant when she accepts, after Yatma's father initiative, to marry Yatma. She later tells her new husband that by accepting to marry him, she wants him to pay for his crime by looking after Mbanick junior, the son of his victim. For several years, she refuses to make love with him and in the mean time, Yatma is perceived and treated in the village as a

criminal. Mbanick's parents refuse all his fish presents and constantly humiliate him. As time goes, Maxoye finally gets used to her husband and eventually gives birth to a second son. But being as defiant as any tragic character, Yatma steps into the ocean to follow little Mbanick and his friend Amul in spite of the fact that he was warned against ever coming close to the village waters. The revengeful spirit of Mbanick reappears in the form of a big whale and kills him in the middle of the river. His body is never seen.

In *La colère des dieux*, Tanga and Halyaré are not exactly brothers. Halyaré is Tanga's uncle and has been waiting for the day when the king would die to take over. Without much effort, Tanga forces his uncle to give up on his dream and be made an elder in the kingdom. Although he apparently accepts this new position, Halyaré never forgets the numerous humiliations of Tanga. He becomes very close to Awa who tells him the terrible secret: the newborn prince is not Tanga's son, but Rasmané's. When the king discovers the truth and decides to kill Salam in order to protect his power as requested by the oracle, Halyaré runs to warn Awa who immediately escapes with his help.

It is worth nothing that in this community where the wishes of the king are virtually orders, Halyaré is the only person to overtly challenge Tanga or to request that he behave in a more responsible way. Although one can easily identify with the rightfulness of Halyaré's behavior, it is clear, as he says himself and as discovered by the king, that this righteousness is basically nurtured by the reciprocal hatred between them. When the guards catch Halyaré and take him to Tanga who requests that he be immediately killed, Halyaré spits on his nephew and insults him, then goes to death without the slightest remorse. In other words, he seems to have attained a goal: ruin his

rival brother who will move from failure to failure until he dies as the many people he has killed and, more specially, killed by his own son.

It appears from the above that whether we deal with eminent princes, nobles or ordinary characters, victims or agents, brothers or parents, all films considered here develop a mythical imagination or metaphor to generate a reflection on the metaphysics of evil, desire, power in a family and a society in crisis. The reproduction of both the Oedipal cycle and the Biblical myth of Cain and Abel reminds us of the persistence of some cultural archetypes in human societies. It also illustrates the place of self or mutual destruction in cases where the ego is pushed to the absolute. In all these films, families and communities are scattered, historical values are challenged and destroyed. The expulsion or death of the father, cousin or rival brother is the only guarantee not be forced to suffer this same fate. Violent reciprocity here is always a fatality: the community kills Saga before he destroys the cultural order; Ngo tries to impose his will on Ossie before he can take any initiative; Yatma kills Mbanick before he can continue to humiliate him by his various successes; Tanga tries to kill Salam before finally being killed by him as announced by the oracles; the gods abandon Salam who commits suicide after realizing that he is only an object that does not have as much free will as he imagines. In all these films, the only finality is tragic, and it is death, a death that is made unavoidable because various subjects live in absolute that make every narrative oscillate between happiness and unhappiness among characters and even spectators.

One other important feature of all the narratives mentioned here is that the somehow misogynist representation of women that regularly into the femme fatale cliché. That is nothing particularly African, but it interesting to note that women here again

appears to be the most perfect channel for the tragic. There is certainly a lot to say about their representation, which is exceptionally metonymic: it is usually her body and her sexuality that seem to be the source for every fatal trouble. When Tanga sees Awa for the first time, the camera zooms on her as she is dancing in front of the new king. The lecherous king then chooses her and then goes to elope her from their compound, to the satisfaction of their parents who will be the first to perish when the king realizes that he has been raising somebody else's son. Maxoye's is only perceived as a beautiful woman, not as a human being.

One other thing worth mentioning is that these films, especially *La colère des dieux* and *Adanggaman*, rely very much on the power of the oracle. Knowledge is certainly crucial in every tragedy. Saga has to be killed because there is evidence that he committed a transgression. Ossei quarrels with his father because he knows he is involved with a girl from a miserable lineage. But knowledge is more crucial when it is forecasted. Oedipus knew he would die. In *La colère des dieux*, Tanga knows from the beginning that his offense will be punished because gods do not forgive. In spite of the many warnings of the oracle, he persists and imposes himself to the kingdom. He initially refuses to do the requested sacrifices and even threatened the oracle. When he decides to do so, it is too late and he has to die. The same thing will happen to his successor.

From the few examples I have mentioned, it is clear that African cinema is now exploring new and foreign forms of orality, by incorporating myths and tragedies in their framework. On the strictly structural level, there are still a lot of similarities with other films like *Wend Kuuni* or *Keita*. But I will not be able to discuss them today, as what I have just said is just part of a bigger project.

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