Malian Cinema and the Question of Military Power

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To cite this article: Alioune Sow (2011) Malian Cinema and the Question of Military Power, Critical Interventions, 5:1, 81-97, DOI: 10.1080/19301944.2011.10781402

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19301944.2011.10781402

Published online: 10 Jan 2014.

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This essay reviews the complex engagement with and representation of military power in Malian cinema by examining the intriguing relationship between cinema and political power in Mali during the military regime (1968-1991). Mali’s postcolonial history was marked by a military coup in 1968, followed by 23 years of military rule, which ended after massive demonstrations and a bloody repression in March 1991. The cinematographic engagement with the military regime has been disparate and the cinematographic response to the military condition has ranged from hesitant and elusive to forceful and dynamic, but has most often been problematic and strategized.

**Military and Cinema**

Besides the emblematic *Finye* (1982) and *Ta Dona* (1991), at first glance very few Malian films seem to have explicitly addressed the military question. It has sometimes been difficult to isolate characteristic cinematographic features, forms, and modes of narration emerging from such a peculiar political environment (as it occurred, for instance, in Brazilian cinema). For pragmatic reasons, Malian filmmakers have privileged a minimalist and rather tangential approach to dealing with the Moussa Traoré regime in their presentation of Malian realities. This is the case in Cheick Oumar Sissoko, who has diagnosed the postcolonial Malian experience under the Traoré government with two films *Nyamanton* (1986) and *Finzan* (1989), which respectively center on the drama of street children, women’s conditions, and rural exodus. The questions raised by Cheick Oumar Sissoko about the alarming social conditions are indeed contingent on the appalling policies implemented by the ruling regime, and most of the itineraries depicted in both films are dramatically disrupted because of the characters’ desperate attempts to search for alternatives (*Nyamanton*) or resist at all costs the conditions imposed by Traoré’s government (*Finzan*). Instead of focusing on the anatomy of military power, which he did later on and allegorically with *Guimba* (1995), Sissoko examines here the implications of military practices for ordinary citizens and deprived individuals, emphasizes the total absence of coherent social policies, and contradicts the discourse of the Traoré regime, which justified the 1968 coup by underlining Modibo Keita’s inadequate response to social urgencies in Mali.

Adama Drabo’s *Ta Dona* provides another example of the prudent approach. In contrast with the subtle critique of the regime by Cheick Oumar Sissoko, *Ta Dona*, along with Cissé’s *Finye*, is one of the Malian films that explore the military question in a more direct way. However, curious nuances at the end of *Ta Dona* indicate how complicated the relationship with military power could be. Directly inspired by the cabinet reshuffling and the trials of major Malian political figures in 1978, *Ta Dona* denounces the slow degradation of modes of living in rural areas and the increasing threat to the local population through Sidy, a young and ambitious engineer who discovers how a ring of corrupt politicians and military officials is jeopardizing the modernization of the country.
by incongruous agricultural and environmental policies. While Ta Dona’s initial intentions were to condemn the incompetence of the military authorities and to expose the complacency of civil servants, Drabo’s thesis loses its vigor in the second part of the film and becomes almost muted towards the end. After presenting dreadful incompetence by local authorities, and exposing bribery and laziness as the two dominant modes of functioning of the military, Ta Dona concludes rather ambiguously with the arrest of very few civilians by an efficient anti-corruption brigade commanded by the military. Drabo’s decision to assign the causes of social degradation to the actions of a handful of civilians suddenly cut off from the military hierarchy and disconnected from the specifics of military politics is troubling, but is certainly due to his careful criticism of the military apparatus. Such nuance at the end of the film might seem awkward, but it is nevertheless understandable as it allows the director to better negotiate the reception of his film with military authorities, while at the same time it remains for the informed audience an unmistakable reference to the cynicism of the military power in place.

As Adama Drabo insinuated in an interview with Melissa Thackway, the choice to avoid overdetermined discourse on the military experience, and confrontational and offensive references to the government and its representatives can sometimes be a wise one, especially when the filmmaker receives order from the “dictator himself to come to his palace to show him the film.” The meeting Drabo refers to is a strong reminder that military authorities did not ignore cinematographic production; it also reflects the ambiguous and tortuous relationship between artists, filmmakers and the Traoré government, a relationship constantly cultivated since 1968.

Such relations are not surprising. Malian cinema was born after the military coup and in the first few years the regime played a significant role in attempting to develop and promote a national production. The efforts were purely functional, as the military authorities understood very early on what benefits could be gained from cinema. This started in January 1969 with an initiative by the “Service cinématographique de l’information” to defend its political agenda by providing free screenings of films such as La fin d’une dictature, which recalls the fall of Modibo Keita, in the most popular areas of the capital Bamako. This effort was followed by official discourses on the importance of cinema, presented by the regime as “un instrument de réveil et de pénétration,” (“an instrument of awakening and insight”) and then later by several attempts to generate a coherent and dynamic cinematographic landscape in which a national production could prosper. For that purpose, the regime supported the first “Festival du film soviétique,” a four week festival held in Bamako in April 1969. This festival was later followed by a one week “Festival du film français,” which took place annually from May 1969 until 1972 with a remarkable program (Malle, Jessua, Albicocco and Truffaut) and invited guests such as Pierre Kast and Henri Langlois who came to Bamako in December 1972.

The government’s involvement was also visible through smaller initiatives. For instance, the authorities presented the creation of local cine-clubs, such as the Askia Nouh, as a perfect example of the contribution of local microstructures to the development and stimulation of a local audience for national and international productions. The occasional calls and funding from the government for scriptwriters and filmmakers to make historical films about Mali are additional indicators of the ambition of the authorities, but it is the official reception of early films such as Djibril Kouyaté’s Le retour de Tieman (1970) or Souleymane Cissé’s Cinq jours d’une vie (1972), which clearly indicates how problematic
the relations between cinema and the regime was and continued to be. When released, *Cinq jours d’une vie* was acclaimed in the single party’s newspaper, *L’Essor*, and it was highly praised for its “humanism” and its timely topic; it was described as “necessary” and symbolic of “the social function of cinema.”

In the context of the military government, such a positive reception for a film both focusing on juvenile delinquency and somewhat critical of Malian society could be seen as a paradox, but it becomes less surprising considering that the acclaim came after *Cinq jours* was rewarded the “*Tanit de bronze*” at the 1972 Carthage film festival. Moreover, during the opening ceremony of the French film festival of the same year in Bamako, the French ambassador made multiple references to both *Cinq jours* and Kouyaté’s *Le retour de Tieman* in his official remarks. He stressed the importance and ability of Malian filmmakers in bringing “*un regard lucide sur les problèmes de leur génération, apportant en même temps une contribution essentielle à la connaissance de leur pays.*” (“a lucid observation of the problems of their societies, bringing at the same time, an invaluable contribution to their country.”) Unsurprisingly, government officials were immediately sensitive to the impact cinema could have on the reputation of the country and did take this element into account to develop intricate and opportunistic cultural discourses and policies. These few examples confirm that the regime supported a national production, convinced initially that cinema could be a crucial tool for its own propaganda, as well as enhancing the prestige of the authorities when a Malian film was successful.

To further explain the specifics of the relationship between the regime and the filmmakers and to comprehend the subtle cinematographic representation of the military experience, other elements need to be taken into consideration, especially when a comparison between cinema and other domains of Malian cultural production shows that elsewhere the engagement with the regime was daring and often aggressive. For instance, in fiction, theatre (such as the *koteba*), and particularly in popular music, artists frequently reproduced subversive representations of the military found in the Malian imaginary. Regular affronts to the military were served by the figure of the “*lakrou*,” a grotesque soldier character easily recognizable by his lethargic attitude, his uncertain command of the military habitus, his poor speech and his excessive opportunism.

The disguised nature of the regime itself could be another element in understanding the relationship between cinema and the military. For the most part, military politics in Mali were not spectacular, and despite dramatic stories of arrests and the deportation of public figures and political opponents that are only recently being discovered and debated, the government opted to cultivate a political routine and managed to conceal its repressive nature by reshuffling cabinet members to counter public unrest in 1977, 1978, and 1980. In addition, when it comes to the materiality of the military regime, the government did not have the means nor the willingness to mark its presence by grand realization. There were no particular infrastructures, monuments, or memorials that were erected to outrageously celebrate the head of the government or his achievements, as was the case in other similar situations. For most of the Malians living in Bamako in the 1970s and 1980s, “the military *mise en scène*” was limited to the presence of soldiers in the street and crossroads, and the daily procession of the president and members of his government from the “*camp parachutiste*” in the town center to the presidential palace in the hills of Kououlouba. The head of government himself was relatively
discrete and not “the hypnotic leader” and “the figure of force” which he became in 1991 after realizing the collapse of his regime.\(^\text{16}\)

However, it is mainly the degree of dependence of Malian cinema on government funding, its support from institutions such as the CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie), and European funding through agencies whose governments had close ties with the Malian government, which indicate precisely how complex and intricate the relations were.\(^\text{17}\)

As noted before, the national production grew during the military regime, thanks in part to documentaries commissioned by the government to promote its policies and reforms and to rapidly educate the population on specific societal issues (water management, gender questions, and traditions). These documentaries were also produced by the CNC, which regrouped most of the filmmakers of the country. Moreover, as Manthia Diawara has often made clear in his work on Malian cinema, the way “cinema relates to power” created some puzzling situations such as the partial government funding of Cissé’s *Baara* (1978) and *Finye* (1982).\(^\text{18}\)

Diawara argues that such involvement is a strategic attempt by the military to demonstrate that the regime did not fear pluralism, sending a clear message to the population that “the government respects freedom of expression,” even for a film such as *Baara*, which deals with “trade unions and the weakness of military regime.”\(^\text{19}\)

Such intervention, Diawara concludes, has contributed to the development of a less politicized cinema, forcing filmmakers to distance themselves from pure “antigovernment products” and to find alternative ways to propose “constructive criticism.”\(^\text{20}\)

It could be added to Diawara’s argument that government involvement in national film production could be perceived as a clever maneuver by the regime to demonstrate that it did not fear cinematographic production: simultaneously dismissing the symbolic power of artistic creation and condescendingly challenging the potential and the meaning of the political commitment of cinematographic production at a time when the first demonstrations in Mali had been crushed by the authorities. However, the association between the government and cinematographic production, often in the form of funding, raises several important questions, some of them ethical, about the relationship between a totalitarian regime and its national film production.

What does such a relationship with the military tell us about the aesthetic of the production? What is the effectiveness and legitimacy of a film supposed to decode the mechanisms of the military apparatus when the film itself is partly financed by the guilty individuals it is supposed to target? Should filmmakers constantly address the military question? Should they repeatedly portray and denounce the authorities? These questions are crucial for a better understanding of the association between cinema and the military regime and for identifying the filmmakers’ relation to the politics of the government, their engagements with political realities, the aesthetic particularities, and the cinematographic strategies of their production to escape military constraints and entrapment.

There is not enough space in this essay to examine the entire Malian cinematographic production, so to answer these questions and isolate various forms of engagements with the military order, I will focus on Souleymane Cissé’s *Den Muso* (1975), *Baara* (1978) and most specifically *Finye* (1982). The choice is dictated by the fact that to date, *Finye* is considered Cissé’s most militant film and the most explicit denunciation of the military machine in West African cinema.\(^\text{21}\)

At the same time, *Finye* perfectly illustrates the problematic relationship between the filmmaker
and the regime as the film was partly financed by the Malian government. My contention is that the military involvement through funding did not change Cissé’s intentions and he managed to maintain his agenda by relying on tactical ways to engage with political realities and expose the military order of things. Moreover, as Baara and Den Muso were, Finye has also been praised for its innovative aesthetics in addressing issues of gender, women’s conditions, and traditions.22

What I want to examine in Cissé’s engagement with the Malian military experience is whether the aesthetic innovations can be seen as a response to the limitations on addressing the military condition and whether a focus on the military question might produce a better understanding of the issues of gender, women’s conditions, and poverty.

**Cissé and the Inescapable Military**

At the time Finye was shown in Western cinemas Souleymane Cissé was already considered in Bamako, and in most of West Africa, to be a radical filmmaker. His brilliant Den Muso (1975) placed him immediately among the most inventive filmmakers of his generation. In Den Muso, he did not hesitate to address sensitive and controversial issues related to the anatomy of the Malian society through a portrayal of Malian youth, which contrasted and challenged most of the images of the subordinated, frustrated, and disenchanted young men and women that circulated in literature and cinema at the time. The film, read as a “social film,” recalls the collapse of Malamine Diaby, a rich and successful businessman following an affair between his daughter Ténin and Sékou, an ex-employee of his factory.23 It includes an impressive discourse on sexuality and disability as well as a touching depiction of the loving relationship between father and daughter, too often codified elsewhere. Den Muso deals with youth’s desire for emancipation from immutable traditions and reinvented norms, their intentions to break with rigid sexual politics, and willingness to grasp any opportunity given to them to reclaim freedom of choice and action. Most of the female characters do not openly criticize societal codes, but their actions demonstrate not only how defiant and audacious they are, but also persevering: they reject victimhood and embrace, in existentialist terms, absoluteness, responsibility and authenticity, as Ténin’s tragic love story and final gesture demonstrate.

Already in Den Muso, Cissé reveals how centered on class relations and struggle his work is going to be, but the film also indicates how all these issues are subordinated to the military regime. The youths’ actions cannot be disconnected from the insidious power structures shaped by the military control, which command the interaction between individuals like workers and patrons, domestics and patrons, or perverse lovers who respond to their employers’ humiliations by seducing their daughters. Money and power remain the main obsessions in Den Muso. The prejudice they create and the uncertainty which they project into most of the characters, allow Cissé to highlight one of the great contradictions of Mali’s postcolonial history: how a small group of men in power were able to confiscate and manipulate practices of power in order to restrain the possibilities of social emancipation that both independence and the military regime were supposed to bring.24

Den Muso evaluates options to respond to this constraining order and denounces the failure of the nationalist and socialist agenda often propounded by the military in power to justify their presence. Interestingly, in imaging the pitfalls of Malian national consciousness, to paraphrase Fanon, few notable public figures are clearly identifiable and very few explicit references to Traoré authoritarian regime are made. For instance, the only sequence
in which men in uniforms appear in the film takes place in the “commissariat” where the conflict between Sékou and Ténin’s mother who accuses Sékou of having raped and impregnated her daughter, takes place. In this sequence nothing in the dialogue or attitudes of the policemen reveals the nature of the regime and the danger associated with its practices. However, even if the military remains tangibly invisible on screen, the military order of things becomes perceptible and visible through Cissé’s strategies. They are strategies that transform his fixation on barriers to individual emancipation, unexpected identity and social relations, inaccessible prosperity, and the precarious quotidian generated by the dubious pacts of a dazzling bourgeois minority with those in power, all unmistakable references to the logics and restrictive practices of the military regime.

Several narratives are juxtaposed in *Den Muso* to depict the fragile sociopolitical climate of the seventies in Mali and, most importantly, to warn of its psychological toll on individuals. The first narrative has to do with social limitations and helps us understand the means and motivations of youth to break away from oppressive conditions materialized by the concentration of power in the hands of a few, and the restriction of social mobility because of the politics of patronage between individuals and the authorities. The second narrative, at first glance, seems to be an apolitical response to this deleterious sociopolitical climate. On one hand, the youth seem to be impassive to the politics of Malian society, as most sequences dedicated to the youth are about entertainment, parties, cinema, games of love, and enjoyment in remote banks of the river Niger, reminiscent of the mood and aesthetics of Malick Sidibé’s photographic series “La chaussée” in 1972. If Cissé’s stunning images of the youth (bodies, dance, seduction, nudity) are daring and provocative, they do not conceal the issue at stake, which is the antagonistic relationship the youth cultivate with the rest of the society. The forms and location of the youth’s activities demonstrate that the problem for them is, indeed, separation and isolation, hidden activities, and forms of entertainment, which translate into introversion and an inability to exchange with adults. On the other hand, Sékou’s departure from his original ambition points to an inadequate response to the emerging bourgeois order he discovered while at Diaby’s factory. Instead of taking the lead in a constructive struggle for social emancipation, he becomes a mythomaniac delinquent simply animated by an irrepressible desire to seduce and possess.

At the end of *Den Muso*, what is left is a sense of despondency because of what seems to be the dilution of the initial narrative into a conflict between a father and his daughter. The expected confrontation between Malamine Diaby and Sékou, which is promised in Marxist terms of a battle between the profiteer and the exploited, seems to have vanished. In reality it does not. In the course of the film, the viewer discovers that Sékou’s aggressive but sophisticated verbal assault of his employer’s degrading policy is indeed accurate. Sékou’s primary objections are constantly illustrated by sequences within Malamine Diaby’s modern and luxurious house, which contrasts with the desolated courtyard of Sékou’s household, demonstrating that disparity and prejudice prevail and should be challenged. In fact, following the initial confrontation, the camera adopts Sékou’s point of view when it comes to the portrayal of the ruling class. Diaby’s privileged position within society and his prosperity are rendered visually by his social exclusivity, the majesty of his movements, his complacency and arrogant distance from other members of society, and his immaculate white “bazin,” which often seems offensive in the
middle of his impoverished parents’ courtyard. In addition to the images, there is an incongruity located in the soundtrack, signaled by the praise songs which continuously eulogize Diaby despite the reprehensible nature of some of his actions, suggesting complicity, accommodation, and ultimately disclaiming new forms of submission, for praise singing cannot be dissociated from power relations and practices.

_Den Muso_ could easily be seen as problematic and perceived as a complicated assemblage in which, as Murphy has suggested, “Cissé appears far more concerned with exploring the experience of being young in modern-day Bamako than with making specific political or social points.” Similarly, it might be particularly difficult to clearly identify how Cissé can explicitly talk about the Traoré’s regime and convey a coherent reflection on social and political urgencies in postcolonial Mali. However, this confusing scenario tells us more about Cissé’s ideology on language with regard to, and relationship to the military as the assemblage stimulates an original approach and deeper reflection on the military order of things precisely at a moment when conventional critique of the regime was unthinkable.

It is indeed Ténin, Diaby’s disabled and withdrawn daughter, who helps rationalize all this. Her tragic relationship with Sékou maintains the connection with the social and the political as she exposes the limitations and contradictions of the two adversaries and the resulting collective malaise associated with them. As noted already, Ténin brings authenticity and absoluteness to the film by killing, after the death of her father, her unfaithful lover and by committing suicide. Before the dramatic ending, she has managed to reveal Diaby’s transformation from a caring and liberal father to an authoritarian and anxious individual who turns violent to protect honor, codes, and power, and she confirms Sékou’s perfidy in reproducing the practices of power initially condemned. Ténin’s implication in the conflict between Diaby and Sékou allows Cissé to show that the family, the social, and the political are inseparable and that, in the context of the military in Mali, a reflection on any of these notions leads inevitably to a reflection on the others.

As her relationships with both Sékou and Malamine deteriorate, Ténin not only confirms that both Diaby and Sékou are the products of a vicious system, but she engages the viewer with the additional question of how to respond to this social, political, and family crisis. An element of response is provided by an innocuous segment of the film in which Ténin leafs through a book. The camera shifts repeatedly from Ténin’s intense gaze to various postcards of what seems to be an assembly of Mande blacksmiths, a resolute young Fulani girl, photos of Malian traditional attire and different hairdos. If most of the black and white images she observes project cultural pride, guaranty, and stability in the representations of Malian society, they also perplex the young girl as the segment concludes with two ambivalent dream-like sequences of Ténin imagining her own wedding ceremony. The first one depicts a radiant and self-assured modern young woman wearing a Western style wedding dress and the second might be described as a fugitive silhouette wearing an unrefined white fabric running in a narrow alley eager to escape public gaze. Although it begins as innocuous, the segment becomes premonitory, as skepticism and disorientation dominate this sequence, symbolic of the uncertain social and political orientations of the country at a critical moment in the history of Malian society where searches for alternatives had just begun.

Some of these logics are developed further in Cissé’s second film, _Baara_ (1978) in which the question of class struggle and the confrontation between the proletariat and the privileged are
posed once again. As noted by several observers and as the title indicates, *Baara* deals with working conditions, exploitation at all levels, emerging activism, trade unions, women’s emancipation, and social empowerment.\(^{28}\) But *Baara*, with its insistence on individuals at work, looking for work, distributing work, and fighting at work, is also a powerful celebration of work culture and ambition, which contradicts most of the stereotypes and misrepresentations about the laziness and apathy of Africans found in colonial and postcolonial discourses on Africa. It tells the story of Balla Traoré, an engineer who inadvertently meets a young porter called Balla Diarra. Balla Traoré develops a close friendship with Balla Diarra because of the *senankuya* tradition and he helps Diarra find a job in the factory where he works. The relationship with the porter is an illustration of Balla Traoré’s commitments to social justice and equality, and for the porter it is an opportunity to finally access formal employment, responsibility, and self-confidence. Again, dreamlike sequences, which come most of the time from Diarra’s reveries, are regularly inserted to break the initially adopted chronology and to reinforce, through unreal insertions and symbolic interruptions, the aspirations and anxieties of the two characters. For instance, one sequence shows Diarra dreaming about his successful return to his village after having migrated to the city. Another communicates Traoré’s hope for social equality by showing, in slow-motion, the two men walking together and living behind the chaos created by a landscape devastated by fire.

Through Traoré’s confrontation with the owner of the factory, Makan Sissoko, *Baara* points to the aberrations of murky national politics and the consequences of destructive alliances between, once again, opportunistic individuals and military power. The film speaks of this through a straightforward distribution of characters and situations. While most of the characters struggle to come to terms with work and to make a living, Sissoko’s character, by contrast, is defined by prosperity and voracity. His prosperity is translated through images and situations located in his many different properties, revealing an empire constructed through corruptive means and strategic alliances as his summons to a Minister to come to his office suggests. His voracity is demonstrated by his propensity to combine religious values and dubious methods to obtain more, as revealed by his frequent visits to marabouts. At the end, *Baara* is mainly about wasted potential. This is illustrated by the tears of the widows of courageous trade unionists, the sweat of exhausted and uninformed workers, the harassment and arrests of honest porters, and the wasted potential is expressed by the various disenchanted advocates of Malian economic opportunities and equalities. The tone in *Baara* is extremely pessimistic; while the architecture of power is effectively deciphered through the tragedies mentioned above, the discourse against such a structure is augmented by images of social disparities: people waiting in lines and fighting for food supplies and the local bourgeoisie enjoying drinks, food, and music at a popular nightclub. The discourse is reinforced by accusations—“you eat up all the public rights”—and by references to shattered hopes and the frustration of social participation, of not being able to be “a good citizen” because of bribery and a corrupt ruling class, as one of Balla Traoré’s friends argues. One could contrast this pessimism with the scenes of collective meetings, which testify to an emerging activism and militancy that indicates that change is indeed imaginable even if at high cost, as Balla Traoré’s assassination indicates. At the end of the film, scenes of uprising in the factory, images of the angry crowd responding to the union leaders’ injunction to “slit [the] throats” of the guilty, and
characters determined to confront the authorities, leading to the arrest of the factory owner, suggest how violent political action could well be the response to increasing social frustrations and personal tragedies. Implicit in *Den Muso*, violence is in *Baara* explicitly promoted as a mode of action, an ideology Cissé has been seduced by and never concealed, acknowledging “une qualité de la violence” (“a quality of violence”) and arguing that violence can be “un facteur de transformation” (“a factor of transformation”) to attain “la lumière qui ne pourra jamais sortir que de l’affrontement, que de la violence.” (“the light, which will only come from the confrontation, the violence.”) 29

However, the very last scene of the film reveals that order has been restored. The wide-angle shot on the peaceful factory followed by images of a group of porters--among them is Balla Diarra--going on with their business as usual, suggest that things did not turn out as expected. How should we read Balla Diarra’s return to his initial occupation? As a failure of the battle initiated by the engineer Traoré? As a sign that Traoré’s death was worthless? As an indication that the old order has prevailed? Or should we read such an unexpected ending as a necessity for Cissé to adjust his reflection to the political climate and escape censorship and difficulties? The answers to these questions take us back to the narrative about the military order of things. Diarra’s return to his former occupation is an illustration that Traoré’s battle for social equality and emancipation has failed and that in spite of resolute attempts, overcoming the rigid structures imposed by the regime remains an impossible task. This sinister lesson contradicts once again the official rhetoric of the military to legitimize the coup in 1968 in order to guarantee the end of Modibo Keita’s constraining “revolution active,” to fight growing economic difficulties and transform Malian politics. 30

Ten years later, *Baara* asks, what is left of the ideals of the coup and its social inspiration? The answer to the last of the four questions is provided by the confusion cultivated by Cissé in the closure of *Baara*. As in *Den Muso*, Cissé relies on several narratives to construct his film. Alongside the critique of the military revolution’s shortcomings and Traoré’s heroic struggle, *Baara* includes the story of Sissoko’s marital crisis—the collapse of his fourth marriage following the discovery of his wife’s multiple extramarital affairs with his collaborators. What needs to be stressed here is how derivative this story can be when it comes to Traoré’s political and social commitment. Considering the fact that Traoré’s assassination coincides with the factory owner’s murder of his adulterous wife, a clear diversion from Cissé’s thesis on social struggle which comes very late in the film, it is therefore difficult to know what crimes the owner has been arrested for. Such ambiguity is a convenient way to confuse vigilant authorities.

Some of the issues evoked in *Baara* are addressed in greater detail in *Finye* (1982), which proposes a radicalized discourse on social class and a virulent attack against the military power. This time, as opposed to Cissé’s previous films, the regime has a face: some military officials are recognizable, and the practices of power in both the public and private domains are closely examined. *Finye* abounds with several burning topics that seek to comprehend Malian everyday life under the military regime: education and inequalities, the local black bourgeoisie, women’s conditions and polygamy, adultery, politics of land, youth, family and traditions and their relevance to aspects of contemporary society. 31 On one hand, such an abundance of themes is indicative of Cissé’s Brechtian method of engaging with Malian realities and his constant efforts to avoid essentializing the question he is examining. In *Finye*, as in *Den Muso* and *Baara*, Cissé relies on
ordinary and anonymous individuals to confront the military and he rejects what could be called a melodramatic presentation of life conditions under Traoré’s regime. Many subplots help to capture the meaning of the military policies, but they also expose various degrees—conscious or unconscious—of involvement with the regime, which could also explain its longevity. Such proliferation of themes and issues explains why the military experience might have been difficult to comprehend and comment on, but it is one crucial element to understanding how Cissé managed to ingeniously respond to the constraints imposed by the military in financing the film.

In a multilayered construction, *Finye* simultaneously tells the love story of Batrou and Bah, two students in Bamako in the late 1970s early 1980’s belonging to opposite social backgrounds, and the emergence of political opposition in the Malian capital. Batrou is the daughter of the powerful and authoritarian capital governor, Sangaré, while Bah is the grandson of Kansaye, an honest and seemingly ordinary old man who constantly evokes the memory of his son killed by the military. Heterogeneity and social incoherence created by the military regime are the dominant motives of the film. The contrast between the two worlds, revealed by the two lovers’ habits and movements in the city, is accentuated by alternate images of Bah’s popular neighborhood and scenes in Sangaré’s palatial house and gardens or exclusive tennis club. Incursions into the respective houses amplify the striking dissimilarity between the two worlds. While Sangaré’s house is characterized by the surplus, excess, and opulence of European furniture, decoration, perfume, and alcohol, Kansaye’s house, on the other hand, is typified by scarcity, bare interiors, and minimum necessity.

The film is divided into two parts with regular insertions of surreal images and scenes of Bah and Batrou’s wedding to facilitate transitions and denote the dreams of the two lovers. As in his other films, the insertions of what Rachael Langford calls in her analysis of *Finye* “non-mimetic sequences,” may help Cissé play with potentialities, the lovers’ aspirations and possibilities, emphasize probabilities and point to improbabilities. In a way, these repetitive scenes provide the counter-division of the main narrative that the viewer is following, suggesting what reality should be or could be, generating further dramatization and reinforcing the main object of the film, which is the interventions of the military power in daily lives. The movie opens with banal scenes of the life in a Bamako secondary school: sequences in which pupils prepare euphorically and anxiously for the impending baccalaureate examination. While before and during the examination, the pupils show conviction and confidence, the unexpected results bring disappointment, shock, and suspicion for Bah and his close friend Seydou who happened to have failed.

The first part of the movie is also dedicated to the development of the complicated relationship between Batrou and Bah, because of their respective families’ social credentials. If Batrou is seen by Kansaye as the unwelcome daughter of an opportunistic and illegitimate leader, Bah in turn is seen by Sangaré as the heir of a traditionalist family whose social background would constitute an affront to his daughter’s social rank. Calling attention to the reproduction and reinforcement of social and cultural antagonisms to impede self-realization and love, Cissé subordinates the pervasive role of the military to the frustration of the youth. It is rapidly made clear that Bah’s failure at the baccalaureate is the result of Sangaré’s intervention, to further prevent a relationship between his daughter and the young man. Such excessive manipulation and invasion of the most private part of life are the best modes to emphasize and question the state’s
propensity to control individuals and turn the youth’s formation into an oppressive experience by confusing vocation and disrupting socialization to the point there is “no refuge no escaping the state’s control.”

The suffocating military ideology takes other forms for Batrou, and for most of the Sangaré’s family, whose members are all irritated and unsatisfied. Her uncomfortable status of being Sangaré’s daughter is suggested from the opening of the film. In her first appearance on screen, she is seen smiling in the middle of a crowd of fellow pupils leaving the secondary school. While the camera slowly focuses on her to distinguish her from the rest of the group, her smile gradually disappears, indicative of her military guilt as a car driven by a soldier approaches and stops in front of the school to pick her up. The next image shows her seated in the back of the car. Her smile has vanished and a grave face has replaced the one of the radiant girl the viewer saw a few minutes earlier. Kansaye augments her military guilt by humiliating her: he rejects her greetings under the pretext that she is Sangaré’s daughter. Additionally, she is made aware of her military guilty at home, where her mother keeps reminding that her father hates “the pupils and the students.” It is important to note that at home, she is also vulnerable to Sangaré’s provocative third wife, a beautiful young woman who drinks her husband’s whiskey, smokes his cigarettes to fight her boredom, manipulates the conventions of polygamy by challenging her husband’s masculinity, and inherits the derogatory nickname of “la garce” (the bitch) after her attempt to seduce Bah.

The division between the two parts is marked by an intriguing transitional scene. Following the announcement of the baccalaureate’s results, Bah encounters several friends and spends the afternoon inadvertently taking drugs. The scene is long and the spirit of the hippie generation--its experimental and excessive forms of entertainment--are communicated through close-ups and shots of haggard and tearful faces, amorphous bodies, eccentric dress code, loud afro-beat sounds, and odd and often incomprehensible words related to love, sexuality, and hedonism. This scene has been interpreted as a sign of the youth’s vulnerability, their unreliable engagement with the present, their passivity, and their incapability of acting constructively at a moment in which action was desirable. Such harsh evaluations might have been influenced by the condemnations of drug consumption invoked in the scenes showing Bah staggering in the street, harassed by children, humiliated by two soldiers who lament the degeneration of the youth, and his aggressive behavior against both his grandmother and girlfriend after his return home. There is, however, more to these scenes. First, they indicate that the non-conventional spirit and the drug culture of the seventies had also reached the streets of Bamako and seduced the youth who experimented with alternatives to traditional forms of entertainment. Second, and more practically, the scene delays the moment in which Bah is going to announce his failure to his relatives and has to confront and negotiate what is called in Mali the “malaoya,” the intolerable “shame” following the actions of an individual, but with dramatic consequences for the entire family. Third, looking carefully at the youth, it is difficult not to relate the drug consumption to ephemeral forms of escapism in which drug absorption is the problematic response from dutiful children desperately seeking relief from constant obligations and negotiations with the elders, which is bound up in repressed desires, crises of free choice, and constraints and postponement of ideals. This is confirmed at the beginning of the scene when a shameful Bah has to pay respects to his friend’s father, who while trying to console
him unintentionally reveals how he managed to guarantee his daughter’s success: “you should have told me I would have done something about it [...] next year we will see.” Finally, the scene is also cathartic as it initiates awakening, departure from routine, beginning of political action, and confrontation with the system.

Before looking at the modalities of the confrontation, it is important to remember that the political context in which the film takes place is a period in which the long history of the democratization of the country took a new turn. The emergence of a subversive political discourse against the government and major challenges to the military regime ended with the arrest of several intellectual and political figures such as Ibrahima Ly and Bakary Koniba, and the 1980 assassination of the students’ leader Abdul Karim Camara, better known as Cabral, personified in the film by Seydou.

Finye is a celebration of these events and an homage to political commitment in all its different forms and at different levels of society. In doing so, Cissé chooses to present the events in chronological order, with the presentation of the creation of the movement initially limited to the students, followed by the brutal response by the regime. The homage is perceived through the director’s insistence on the emergence of a charismatic leader such as Seydou who is able to galvanize his fellow pupils with an effective and urgent resistance rhetoric directly inspired by the nationalist discourse of the sixties. The bravery of the students is represented by a disorderly creation of the movement and an amateurish sense of rebellion due to their precocious political apprenticeship. Scenes of mistrust among students and useless and endless discussions about whether or not Bah should be included in the movement delay their departure from the basement of the school where political tracts are produced and contribute to their arrests. Cissé’s homage includes the dilemma between freedom and renouncement, sacrifice, action and responsibility, audacity and fearfulness. Hence, after the arrest, Batrou’s sense of responsibility and determination to stay involved in the movement or Bah’s commitment to action and resistance, which implies being deported to the Northern prison camps in Kidal, contrast with the hesitancies and weaknesses of the other students terrorized by the violent repression and the government tactics to end the demonstrations.

Issues about commitment raised by Cissé are complex and to demonstrate how agonizing the renouncement to political action can be, he reveals in long scenes of repression the brutality of the regime. The scenes of repression are detailed and tense. The images, sounds, and locations selected echo a culture of political violence and repression found in other confrontational situations such as World War II, military regimes such as Argentina during the Dirty War, or Chile under Pinochet, to name just a few. The carceral atmosphere is translated by multiple shots in the military camps, images of forced labor, dark rooms and cells, sounds of military boots resonating in empty corridors, and disciplined military personnel standing in all corners. To underscore the brutality of the regime, Cissé relies on familiar images of repressive methods such as empty desks used for interrogations, with a stern and determined Sangaré seated behind. Close-ups of the students’ shaved heads, physical scars, and injuries testify to the violence of the repressors, and the terrified faces of mute students communicate the trauma left by the forced labor during which Seydou dies in the camps. Such images are displayed while Sangaré profusely insults the prisoners whom he perceives as “superfluous beings,” to paraphrase Arendt, accusing the “fil de l’enfer et apatrides” (“sons of hell and stateless”) of being
responsible for the nation’s crisis. These scenes stress the manipulation and commodification of Malian national history by the military. Sangaré lectures the students about the history of the country, which, according to him, starts with the coup and legitimizes the sheer determination to preserve and defend the power with the modes of acquisition of power. Reminding the students that the military “had committed [their] lives” to the country, Sangaré attempts to abolish the meaning of the students’ action with an anticommunist rhetoric: “What Marx taught you is useless here.” Ironically, Sangaré concludes his lecture by insisting on the ideals of emancipation motivating the coup but immediately cancels them out by disclosing the arbitrary rules that will keep him protected from any attempt from the population to challenge him.

Despite the abortion of the students’ movement, Finye demonstrates that without them, such possibilities of resistance would not have been imagined and the structure and the violent repressive methods of the military would not have been discovered. In addition, the rapid and brutal repression of the students’ movement enables Cissé to suggest that resistance and opposition to such a totalitarian regime demands much more than the commitment of the formatted figure of the intellectual or the educated few. There is no better representation of this necessity than Kansaye’s contribution to the struggle. During the entire film, and until Bah’s deportation, Kansaye is depicted as a discrete and measured figure, often hesitant and unable to respond adequately to the demands of the new political order. He is the representative of a respected traditional, but distant, order of things and as most tutelary figures, he “transcends language” by making very few comments on the attitudes of what he calls “the chiefs,” or condemnations of military policies, which he argues, transform the “schools into jails.”

His pungent reflections on the military leadership indicate that the traditional power he personifies has dramatically regressed, aggressively replaced by the military who perceived such forms a threat to their authority as suggested by Sangaré’s regrets when facing Kansaye: “I should have killed all of your kind.”

Cissé problematizes Kansaye’s intervention with two crucial gestures. The first one occurs after he learns the faith of his grandson in a scene that includes all the elements related to Mandé spirituality: the inherited and majestic robe of the ancestors, the serenity of a remote setting, the protocol of the ritual, the sacred baobab, and the white ram. Kansaye’s desperate and tearful plea for help to “the spirits of his race” confirms his doubt about the adequate mode of action to adopt, but the spirits’ propositions to “act according to his own initiative,” their confessions that the “holy forces have abandoned [them]” and intimation to Kansaye to “do [his] offerings and leave,” suggest that, perhaps, the foundational mode of action, which relies on mythology and spirituality, is no longer appropriate. The sense of defeat regarding the spiritual realities and the traditional reference in Kansaye’s agency is augmented later on, in a second scene, when Kansaye burns his sacrosanct robe after the military forces storm his house and students spontaneously solicit him. It would be tempting to read Kansaye’s gesture and his frank response to the students (“our time is gone, the world belongs to you. I Kansaye support you!”) as the total repudiation of his traditional values and references and his sudden conversion to the forms of resistance and action manufactured by the students. However, this narrative would be too simplistic and Cissé cultivates ambivalence as the burning of the robe comes after a testing encounter with Sangaré during which the dignified Kansaye accuses the governor of land grabbing and commands him to liberate his grandson,
while miraculously escaping death when the governor attempts to kill him, attesting that his offerings have worked and that the supernatural forces are still protecting him. In addition, it is important to note that the students solicit Kansaye without knowing that he has burnt his robe, indicating how valuable they believe the old man’s knowledge, position, and mode of action are for them.

By complicating the reading of Kansaye’s gesture, Cissé rebukes the idea that in order to embrace modernity and progress and respond adequately to contemporary social and political urgencies, a total repudiation of traditional forms of knowledge and power is necessary. Kansaye’s intervention is used to reinforce the notion that traditional Mandé knowledge, authority, and traditions are still relevant, at the condition that they are reconsidered and adjusted to the needs of the time and at the condition that a receptive space in which spiritual realities could be nurtured is required. The violence of the military towards such traditional knowledge demonstrates that the conditions for productive relation are not met.

At the end of *Finya*, it is understood that revolt is on its way and the determined crowd followed by Kansaye manages to threaten the military government to the point that a cabinet reshuffle occurs and military governors such as Sangaré are immediately replaced by civilians. Interestingly, the closure, which echoes the events of 1978 and 1980, takes us to another element of the intriguing relation between the military and Malian cinema examined. The government response comes in a brief scene between the president and his civilian counselor. It is not difficult for the Malian viewer to identify Moussa Traoré under the traits of the calm and composed individual Cissé has constructed. The complex relationship between filmmaker and the military authorities lies in the imposed contrast between the buoyant and monstrous Sangaré and the animated and insane soldiers encountered during the demonstrations and at the military camps and the hierarchy. It also lies in the distance between the president and the rest of the members of the regime, insinuating it is only a small portion of the members of the military regime that create such tragedy. Considering the circumstances surrounding the making of the film such as the government funding, the troubling difficulties created by the French government to postpone the release of the movie, not to mention Cissé’s brief imprisonment after *Den Muso*, it could be said that the Malian filmmaker had no choice but to offer such representation especially when considering that, according to Jean-Francois Senga, it is Moussa Traoré himself who intervened to liberate Cissé in 1974. The slight modification in the representation of the power in place in order to single out the head of state illustrates Cissé’s mediating approach precisely at the moment he started considering that “pungent criticism of the system” was not necessarily adequate. The irony is that history will ultimately demonstrate how prophetic Cissé was. Nine years after the release of *Finya*, students, unionists, and ordinary citizens conducted massive demonstrations initiating the fall of the regime.

As indicated in the beginning of this essay and after looking at examples of Malian national production, the complex question of the engagement with and representation of the military regime can be understood through the examination of the careful and pragmatic approaches adopted by most filmmakers. Being both highly dependent and vulnerable to political power, filmmakers have attempted to prevent censorship or devaluation of their production by producing what could be called in some cases a measured cinema, a less didactic production than perhaps initially envisaged or expected in
a situation of military dictatorship. As noticed, filmmakers, such as Adama Drabo and Cheick Oumar Sissoko to take just these two examples, have avoided an overly pedagogical approach to the military question and kept away from any frontal attacks on the government’s main representatives for pragmatic reasons, while at the same time emphasizing the incoherencies of postcolonial Malian society under the Traoré regime. Other filmmakers, such as Souleymane Cissé, have strategically responded to the constraints and imperatives of filmmaking under military rule by adopting rather straightforward and visible tactics, such as the dilution of the military question into multiple issues, repetitive digressions from the main narrative, and alleviating the depiction of the military hierarchy by separating individuals from the summit of the military machine, never failing to demonstrate the regime’s inefficiency and its manipulation of the population’s misery. In doing so they manage to keep alive the symbolic power of the national production.

Notes
2 On 9 January 1969, the Malian newspaper L’Essor reproduced in its editorial section Moussa Traoré’s definition of the military “new order” based essentially on “le travail, la discipline, la justice, l’ordre et le respect de la hiérarchie” see L’Essor, 9 January 1969.
3 Several other weaknesses related to the unproblematised love relationship between Sidy and Koro, the daughter of one of the most corrupt agents, are highlighted in Jonathan Haynes, “Sango Malo, Ta Dona, returning to the African village,” Jump Cut 40 (1996): 62-66.
6 L’Essor, 2 February 1969. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.
7 L’Essor, 23 May 1969.
9 L’Essor, 28-29 October 1972.
10 L’Essor, 23 October 1972.
12 This has been demonstrated in 1987 after Souleymane Cissé was awarded the Prix Spécial du Jury in Cannes for Yeelen and was welcomed and celebrated in Bamako by officials of the government.
13 This is a direct heritage of the harsh representation and depiction of the first soldiers working with the colonial administration. Criticism and challenge to their involvement and proximity with the colonial power has been illustrated in particular in Hampâté Bâ’s Wangrin (1973) and Onin mon commandant (1994) as well as in Massa Makan Diabaté’s Le lieutenant de Kouta (1979).
15 The events of 1978 are the most important, when Moussa Traoré arrested three influential members of his regime, Tiécoro Bagayoko, Kissima Doukara, and Karim Dembélé. Bagayoko, chief of the national security, was famous in Mali for his outrageous behavior and his role in the sport and music scene. Known as “La bande des trois,” they were convicted of corruption and sent to
the prison camps in the north of the country, where they died. This trial opened a new era for the regime marked by the renaming of the main authority, Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (CMLN). It became Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM).

16 Susan Sontag, Under the Sign of Saturn (New York: Picador, 2002), 92


18 Diawara, African Cinema, 81.

19 Diawara, African Cinema, 81.

20 Ibid.


23 Murphy, Postcolonial African Cinema, 111.


25 Murphy, Postcolonial African Cinema, 112.

26 Lindiwe Dovey, African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen. (New York: Columbia University Press), 192.

27 Diawara, African Cinema, 81; Armes, African Filmmaking, 76.


31 Langford, “Politics and Aesthetics in Francophone African Film,” 197.


33 Murphy, Postcolonial African Cinema, 123.


35 Armes, African Filmmaking, 78.

36 This is an example of a long-standing history of democratization in Mali. It confirms what Bayart reminds us that, “contrary to a widely held opinion, the wave of pro-democracy of 1989-91 was caused less by the fall of the Berlin Wall or the speech of Francois Mitterrand at the Franco-African summit at La Baule in June 1990 or by pressure from aid donors than by the resurgence of old expectations and social movements of long standing, able to assert themselves once more as soon as international organizations had moderated their support for authoritarian regimes.” See: Jean François Bayart, “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion,” African Affairs 99 (2000): 217-267. See also Barlet, African Cinema, 92.


39 This question of the relation between language and age in Mali is fully developed by Canut in her study. See: Cécile Canut, Une langue sans qualité (Montpellier: Lambert-Lucas, 2007), 38.

40 Ukadike, Questioning African Cinema, 23.

41 Diawara, African Cinema, 29; See also Jean-Francois Senga, “Souleymane Cissé, cinéaste malien,” Présence