

A Kino Lorber release

SEMBENE!



A Film by Samba Gadjigo
and Jason Silverman

86 mins • 2015 • USA/Senegal • Unrated
• English with French/Wolof
www.kinolorber.com

Official Selection 2015 Sundance Film Festival
Official Selections 2015 Cannes Film Festival

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“Whether it’s DeMille, Hitchcock, the Senegalese filmmaker Sembene ... we’re all walking in their footsteps every day...” – Martin Scorsese

SHORT SYNOPSIS

In 1952, Ousmane Sembene, a Senegalese dockworker and fifth-grade dropout, began dreaming an impossible dream: to become the storyteller for a new Africa. This true story celebrates how the “father of African cinema,” against enormous odds, fought a monumental, 50-year battle to give Africans a voice.

MEDIUM SYNOPSIS

In 1952, Ousmane Sembene, a dockworker and fifth-grade dropout from Senegal, began dreaming an impossible dream: to become the storyteller for a new Africa. SEMBENE! tells the unbelievable true story of the “father of African cinema,” the self-taught novelist and filmmaker who fought, against enormous odds, a 50-year battle to return African stories to Africans. SEMBENE! is told through the experiences of the man who knew him best, colleague and biographer Samba Gadjigo, using rare archival footage and more than 100 hours of exclusive materials. A true-life epic, SEMBENE! follows an ordinary man who transforms himself into a fearless spokesperson for the marginalized, becoming a hero to millions. After a startling fall from grace, can Sembene reinvent himself once more?

LONG SYNOPSIS

Over scenes of an African village, we hear a voice, the voice of Samba Gadjigo: “I grew up in a small village in Senegal, with no TV, no newspapers, no radio. All I had was stories told by my grandmother. By the time I was 14, I dreamed of becoming French, like the characters in the books I read in high school. When I was 17, I discovered the stories of Ousmane Sembene, the father of African cinema. Suddenly, I did not want to be French anymore. I wanted to be African.”

Gadjigo, Sembene’s biographer, opens a lock to a door of a house on the coast of Senegal, the house of Sembene, which he is entering for the first time since the filmmaker’s death three years prior. Inside, Gadjigo sees wreckage: papers everywhere, vandalism. Outside, rusty film cans are evaluated and opened. The legacy of the most revered of African artists is in danger. “I cannot let this happen,” Gadjigo tells us. “I will not let Sembene be forgotten.”

Using a weave of archival materials, new footage, animation and clips from Sembene’s films, Gadjigo leads us through Sembene’s remarkable life, from hardship to triumph to tragedy and finally to a redemptive ending.

Son of a fisherman, Sembene grew up in a small village in southern Senegal. He was kicked out of school in sixth grade, moving to Marseilles in search of a deeper understanding of the world. But the only work he finds is hauling sacks in slave-like conditions on the docks. While carrying a sack of coffee, Sembene fractures several vertebrae. He turns what to others might be a crippling injury into a blessing, using the moment to read voraciously — noting that, “My Africa was missing” from world literature. It was during this time that Sembene teaches himself to write, crafting novels of working-class struggle that became sensations in France.

We hear more of Gadjigo’s story. The French-dominated Senegalese school curricula leaves him wishing to be someone — a white Frenchman — he could never be. His first encounter with Sembene’s novels at the age of 17, inspire him, reminding him that Africans had the same human potential as anyone else. “It was the first time I was proud to be African,” he says. For the next 17 years, as he progresses through the educational system and receives a scholarship to study in the U.S., Gadjigo worships Sembene from afar. Sembene’s books and films keep him connected to home and deepen his understanding of African struggle.

In 1960, Sembene returns home amidst the jubilation of African independence and vows to make movies that will serve as a “night school” to galvanize and liberate Africans. Against all odds, and using any means necessary, he makes his first two films: the 20-minute *Borom Sarret* (1963), which presents the experiences of a starving cart driver in Dakar; and *Black Girl* (1966), the story of a domestic worker enslaved by her white employers. His star rises: the first Black juror at Cannes, an award winner at festivals worldwide, a growing hero to radical artists, politicians and freedom fighters everywhere.

By the late 60’s, Sembene is among the many expressing impatience, frustration and betrayal at the failure of African leaders to fulfill the promises of independence. His radical films and books had made Sembene, in the words of Gadjigo, “honey to the bees” for Black intellectuals and artists around the world and an icon of African resistance. His rebellious and provocative films include *Emitai* (1971), a story of resistance and rebellion against French rule and Africa’s first historical epic; and *Xala* (1975), a wickedly sharp satire that remains the best expose of black hypocrisy in the era of global economics. Both films are banned or censored by the Senegalese government.

With the film *Ceddo*, a vivid, action-filled historical drama questioning the legitimacy of Islam, Sembene finally goes too far. It is blasphemous, ending with an Imam being shot by a princess in a village. *Ceddo* explores the political and religious battles that continue to define Africa, and it alienated many people in power. Scholar Manthia Diawara remembers warning Sembene that he was going to get attacked like Salman Rushdie.

African leaders ban the film, sending Sembene into a funk. He is on the brink of financial ruin, and his film is not seen in Africa. *Ceddo* is the last film he will make for nine years. After watching his marriage collapse due to neglect, alienating friends and family with his single-minded focus on his work, the man of the people is alone.

It is against this background of frustration and alienation that Sembene makes a decision that will haunt him. In 1985, he is named the head of a Senegalese film fund and selects a team of young filmmakers, including his protégé Boris Boubacar Diop, to make a film about a massacre of African soldiers by the French Army. But as their production falters, Sembene seizes the money, applying it to his own film about the same story. *Camp de Thiaroye* (1986), winner of six prizes at the Venice Film Festival, is a masterpiece, but a personal disaster for Sembene. The French ban *Camp de Thiaroye*, fearful that the film, based on the real-life massacres of African soldiers by French officers, would prove embarrassing and perhaps provoke calls for restitution. And the African youth, who previously considered Sembene a hero, now call him a thief. His reputation failing him and his finances depleted, Sembene enters a dark phase, unable to make a film for the next six years.

Gadjigo, now a successful professor in the U.S., returns to Dakar to invite Sembene on a speaking tour in the U.S. After being rudely rebutted – “Why should I waste my time with American academics,”— Sembene is eventually convinced. The tour is the starting point of an intense and inspirational relationship that continues for 17 years until Sembene’s death. In the young Gadjigo, Sembene sees proof that his films and books matter.

With help from Gadjigo, Sembene attempts to reinvent himself once again, investing his still-militant films with a rich new humanity. *Guelwaar* (1995), an unashamedly autobiographical film, follows a flawed hero who is killed by his rivals and becomes the subject of a religious feud. It also offers a fiery diatribe about the shame of foreign aid.

Through exclusive behind-the-scenes footage we see the making of *Moolaade* (2004), showing that Sembene, even in his 80’s and losing his eyesight, remained fiercely determined to accomplish his vision. The film explores resistance to female genital mutilation in a small village, and includes scenes of both beauty and frank brutality towards women. Sembene worked through the day, surviving by staying on an IV each night. Ultimately redemptive, and a prizewinner at Cannes, *Moolaade* connects Sembene with his widest audience. “This is the way to do it in Africa,” *Moolaade* star Fatoumatah Coulibaly tells us. “You put your finger in the wound. People see, think and react.”

But *Moolaade* is also the final act for Sembene. He never regains his health from the strain of the production. Three years later, he dies, as was his wish, upright, in the arms

of his maid. Gadjigo is there on the day of Sembene's death, capturing the emotional burial and pledging to carry his work forward.

What will become of African cinema after Sembene, the man who created it and took it to its heights? Gadjigo begins what represents a step forward, traveling to rural Senegal to show African films to audiences who have never seen them. These are films about Africans, made for Africans and, finally, being seen by Africans.

FILMMAKER BIOS

Samba Gadjigo, Writer/Director/Producer

Samba Gadjigo, the director of the documentary *Making of Moolaade*, is the world's foremost expert on the life and work of Ousmane Sembene and author of Sembene's official biography, published in English as *Ousmane Sembene: The Making of a Militant Artist* by the Indiana University Press, and in French as *Ousmane Sembene: Un Conscience Africaine*. He was born and raised in Kidira, Senegal, was educated at the University of Dakar and the University of Illinois, and is professor of African Studies and French at Mt. Holyoke College, where he has taught since 1986.

Jason Silverman, Writer/Director/Producer

Jason Silverman is an award-winning film producer (*Olympia*, Opening Night film, SXSW; Closing Night film, Slamdance; Sundance Channel; *Shameless*, Best Film, Great Plains Film Festival) and longtime festival director. He has produced large-scale events for the Smithsonian, the Lensic Center for the Arts, the Tribeca Film Festival and the Lannan Foundation. He is currently Cinematheque Director at the Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, and former Artistic Director of the Taos Talking Picture Festival. He received Santa Fe's Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts in 2014, and is a two-time Sundance Fellow.

Ricardo Acosta, Editor

Ricardo Acosta immigrated to Canada from his native Cuba in 1993 and has edited both documentary and dramatic films that have been shown around the world. His latest film *Herman's House* is directed by Angad Bhalla and received a 2014 Emmy Award for Best Cultural Programming. *Marmato* was screened at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. Other films include: *Shooting Indians*, *A Journey With Jeffrey Thomas* (1997); *Unbound* (1996); *Spirits of Havana* (2001); *The Take* (2004); *Runaway Groom* (2005); *Tiger Spirit* (2009); and *El Juicio de Pascual Pichun* (2007).

Edwina White, Animation

Edwina White is one of the publishing world's most exciting illustrators, having created work for *Vanity Fair*, *Harpers*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Her fine art is represented by Kinz, Tillou + Feigen.

Ken Myhr, Composer

Ken Myhr has written music for more than 100 documentary dramatic, series and feature films including *The World Before Her* and *Herman's House* (for which he was nominated for a 2014 Canadian Screen Award). As a musician, he has recorded and toured with the Cowboy Junkies and Jane Siberry, and performed on the *David Letterman Show*, the *Tonight Show* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.

Chris Jonas, Additional Music

Chris Jonas is a composer, intermedia/video artist, conductor and instrumentalist. He is founder of Little Globe, producer of the nationally broadcast documentary *Our Time Is Now* and recipient of the 2008 U.S. Artists Award

Matt Cohn, Associate Editor

Matt Cohn was the editor of *Through a Lens Darkly*, which premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival and screened at the Film Forum.

Robb Moss, Story Consultant

Robb Moss directed the films *Secrecy* (2008, with Peter Galison) and *The Same River Twice* (2003), which screened in more than 50 film festivals and 100 theatrical venues around the world, was nominated for a 2004 Independent Spirit Award, won awards in Nashville, Chicago, New England, and Alabama, and was selected by Jonathan Rosenbaum of the Chicago Reader as the best documentary and cinematography of 2003. His films have shown at Telluride, the Museum of Modern Art and Lincoln Center, IDFA, Rio, Jerusalem, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, Sidney, Thessaloniki, Zagreb, and Sweden. He has taught filmmaking at Harvard for more than 20 years.

Joe Bini, Story Consultant

Joe Bini has edited 15 films for Werner Herzog, including the Oscar-nominated *Encounters at the End of the World*, the acclaimed *Grizzly Man* and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and the forthcoming *Queen of the Desert*. His credits also include *Manhunt*, *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

Boubacar Boris Diop, Story Consultant

Boubacar Boris Diop is one of West Africa's leading writers of fiction and journalism, weaving together history, myth and genre experimentation. A former technical advisor for the Ministry of Culture of Senegal, he serves as a professor

of literature and philosophy. Diop also is the author of three theatre plays and numerous produced screenplays. His novels include *Murambi*, *The Book of Bones* and *Doomi golo*.

Dan Cogan, Executive Producer

Dan Cogan is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Impact Partners, a fund and advisory service for investors and philanthropists who seek to promote social change through film. Since its inception in 2007, Impact Partners has been involved in the financing of more than 60 films, including *The Cove*, which won the 2010 Academy Award® for Documentary Feature; *Freeheld*, which won the 2008 Academy Award® for Documentary Short Film; *The Garden*, which was nominated for the Academy Award® for Documentary Feature in 2009; *Hell and Back Again*, which won the Documentary Grand Jury Prize and Cinematography Awards at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for the Academy Award® for Documentary Feature; and *How to Survive A Plague*, which was nominated for the Academy Award® for Documentary Feature in 2013.

Cogan co-founded Gamechanger Films, which launched in September 2013. Gamechanger Films is the first for-profit film fund dedicated exclusively to financing narrative features directed by women. Gamechanger's first film, *Land Ho!*, premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival and was acquired by Sony Pictures Classics.

Cogan received his B.A. from Harvard University, Magna Cum Laude, and attended the Film Division at Columbia University's Graduate School of the Arts. In 2014, he was awarded the Leading Light Award at DOC NYC alongside filmmakers Albert Maysles and D.A. Pennebaker.

William T. Conway, Executive Producer

Conway is a screenwriter and producer whose credits include *Spoken Word*, *Bernie* and *Knuckleball*.

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presents

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Editor
Ricardo Acosta, CCE

Executive Producers
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William T. Conway

Executive Producers
Andy Pinkes
Joaquim Duarte Gomes

Composer
Ken Myhr

Additional Music by
Chris Jonas

Animations by
Edwina White
James Dunlap

Story Consultants
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Doug Blush

Boubacar Boris Diop
Robb Moss

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Chris Jonas
Denise Rousseau
Ousmane Sene

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Adrienne McCurrach

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David Aubrey
Jim Bitterman
Salvador Bolivar
Cliff Charles
Abdoul Aziz Cisse
Justin Francese
Samba Gadjigo
Allison Humanek
Terryl Loffler
Jason Silverman

First Associate Editor
Matthew Cohn

Songs
Ja pura River
Madeira River
Performed by Uakti
Composed by Philip Glass
Published by Point Music

Theme from Guelwaar
Performed by Baaba Maal
Composed by Baaba Maal
Unpublished

Licensed by the Ousmane Sembene Estate

Tourista

Performed by Youssou Ndour
Composed by Youssou Ndour Published by
Sony Music Entertainment Inc. Liscensed by
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Homage a Ousmane Sembene

Performed by Mayaka Composed
by Anita Daulne
Unpublished
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