



## TRANSNATIONAL SENEGALESE CINEMA BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND GLOBALISATION

The case of Karmen

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The big dilemma of transnational cultural products is how to please simultaneously different audiences with different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and expectations. Cases like Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Scorsese's *The Last temptation of Christ* and lastly, Mohammed cartoons in Denmark, have shown that what certain audiences consider highly entertaining and attracting can be a direct provocation among others. This article focuses on a controversial reception of the Senegalese transnational film *Karmen* (Senegal/France/ Canada, 2001) in the home country of filmmaker Joseph Ramaka, and compares the debate raised by the film in Senegal to those caused by *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Satanic Verses* in international circles.

Transnational Senegalese cinema is made and received in a postcolonial, diasporic situation, in which directors, financing bodies, film crews and spectators travel between and beyond geographic, national and cultural borders. The films are made by dislocated filmmakers, who have immigrated to Europe or are living both in Europe and in Senegal. Their status may vary from forced exile to volunteer immigration, but permanent or temporary dislocation from their country of origin to a new country is typical for them. This cinema is thus located both in Europe <sup>[1]</sup> and in Africa, and understood as national, foreign or transnational according to its reception context.

The films of diasporic filmmakers are in dialogue with both the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas. They have to reflect the needs and aspirations of at least three different interpretative communities: national audiences at home, national audiences of the host country, and transnational diasporic audiences living in the new host country in situations similar to that of the filmmaker her/himself. The spectatorial situation of transnational cinema is influenced by the nationalist politics and by politics of ethnic representation both at home and in the new host country. Simultaneously, it is influenced by, and must consider, the same global market forces than all the other films competing

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for spectators. Despite the variety of origins and situations of displaced filmmakers, transnational films share certain characteristics concerning aesthetics, narrative and style due to the deterritorialized situation and certain modes of production, exhibition, and distribution typical of transnational films (Naficy, 2001).

## THE TRANSNATIONALITY OF KARMEN

*Karmen* is a typical example of transnational African films because of the deterritorialized location of its director, its interstitial production context and its textual and stylistic hybridity. The director of *Karmen*, Joseph Gai Ramaka, comes from Senegal originally, but has been living in France for 19 years. He is not bound to a certain geographical area or particular place, but rather represents a postmodern *travelling* (Clifford, 1992) or *unhomely* (Bhabha, 1994) subject moving flexibly from a place to another. This kind of postcolonial hybrid identity does not mean that the displaced person is homeless or has cut all ties with his/her original place. On the contrary, these subjects can identify simultaneously with several communities and contribute both to the development of their original community and to their diaspora community (Olwig 1997). This statement is proved in the person of Ramaka, who despite a long absence from his home country has preserved a living relationship with Senegal and worked actively for the development of the Senegalese film industry both there and in France.

*Karmen* is a French-Senegalese-Canadian co-production balancing between industrial and artisanal production modes characterised by Naficy (2001) as interstitial. Interstitiality means that one has to “operate both within and astride the cracks of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity”. One has to look for the niches of alternative film practises but benefit from those of the dominant practises as well (Naficy, 2001: 46-47). Like many other interstitial films, *Karmen* was subsidized by several private and public funding organisations, and the director had to play several roles -scriptwriter, director, producer and others- during the filmmaking process. The shooting crew was as multicultural as the production organisation, and so was the technical cast. The main female role was played by a Senegalese actress, Djeinaba Diop Gai, and her female lover Angelique was interpreted by the Canadian Stephanie Biddle. The film was shot in Dakar, filmstrips were developed in France, and the post-production and laboratory works were made in Canada. The film got its premier in a special screening in the Cannes festival (out of competition) and was distributed in France before arriving to Senegal. Besides the participating countries, *Karmen* was commercially distributed in the United States.

Thematically and formally, *Karmen* is a hybrid combination of several generic, thematic and aesthetic conventions. The film is based on a non-African text, but the events take place entirely in Senegal, and characters are played mostly by Senegalese actors. The genres of Hollywood musical, art film and African social realist film are fused, and Senegalese rhythms are mixed to American jazz music.

The original short story *Carmen* was written by French author Prosper Mérimée in 1845. It seems to contain some universally appealing characteristics and to be a text easily adaptable for different cultural contexts. In Western countries, it became famous especially because of Georges Bizet's opera, first presented in 1875. The story has been adapted in film genres as different as burlesque, opera film, melodrama and musical and others by several renowned filmmakers. All together, there were 52 film adaptations of the story by 2001, when Ramaka's Senegalese *Karmen* was made, and since then at least two other African versions (Moroccan and South African) have to be added.

The main lines of the first African *Karmen* follow the original manuscript quite accurately, but the filmmaker has also tied his personal spices in the story when placing it in contemporary urban Senegal and presenting the protagonist as bisexual. This time, Karmen is a female leader of a Senegalese gang of smugglers, and her lovers range from the old smuggler Samba to the singer Massigi; from the police officer Lamine to the prison warden Angelique. Even if the film is an adaptation of a European novella, it also resonates with Ramaka's autobiographical nostalgia for the memories of Senegalese childhood and for a feminised homeland, common for many interstitial filmmakers (Naficy, 2001: 169). According to Ramaka's own words, he found in Mérimée's novella something familiar that he "already knew through the women I had known, something of my aunts, my mother or friends or mistresses" (interview, 31.3.2002). He has considered *Karmen* as a tribute for Senegalese women.

*Karmen* poses rich data for my study because of the vivid debate that the film created when it premiered in Senegal in July 2001. For the study of its reception, I have used two materials: the press coverage concerning the debate, and three discussion threads on two Senegalese online forums. The press material consists of 118 articles published in Senegalese newspapers and periodicals from April 2001 to July 2002. The criterion for the data collection was that *Karmen* was mentioned by name in the article, without necessarily being the main or the only subject of the story. According to my observations about Senegalese journalism, *Karmen*'s is one of the rare cases when a cultural issue has entered the front pages of

national newspapers. The Internet contributions were collected from two Senegalese discussion forums: the forum of *Le Soleil* ([www.lesoleil.sn](http://www.lesoleil.sn)) and the *Karmen* website <sup>[ii]</sup>, where discussions went on from August 2001 to January 2002. On the forum of *Le Soleil*, two discussion threads had *Karmen* as their main subject: the thread *Polemic about Karmen* consisted of 82 messages, and the thread *For or against the censorship of Karmen?* consisted of 24 messages. The forum of the *Karmen* website received 168 messages during the analysis period. All together, 274 messages were sent to the two forums during five months. The participants in the forum discussions do not represent a cross-section of the Senegalese population, but their messages extend the spectrum of the Senegalese public sphere even beyond the state's boundaries, since many contributors are living in diaspora either in Europe or in America. The fact that contributors do not necessarily participate in the discussion from within the frontiers of the Senegalese state also illustrates how the audiences, and not only the directors, are living in a transnational situation and continue to contribute to the development of their country while living abroad.

## ACCUSED OF BLASPHEMY

*Karmen* had its première in Senegal on July 22, 2001. The screening was a well-prepared and awaited event, presumed to start a new decade in the country's cinema. About 1,200 viewers, both invited guests and film enthusiasts, attended the première and the gala soirée at "Bel Arte", the theatre of the Centre International de Commerce Exterieur du Sénégal (CICES) in Dakar. After the première, there were several other public screenings in two cinemas owned by Ramaka's company even if the film had not been officially launched in cinemas yet. The reviews published in the main Senegalese newspapers after the première were cautious and hesitant, but nothing forewarned about the coming protest against the film.

The good start was cut short six weeks later, on September 8, when the film was violently attacked by a group of *baye fall* belonging to the Senegalese Muslim brotherhood *Mouridism*. Protesters accused the film of blasphemy because in one scene a religious song, "Kalamoune", written by the founder of Mouridism, Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, was presented in the context of the suicide of the lesbian prison warden, Angelique. The whole excerpt of the love relationship between two women, Karmen and Angelique, was considered provocative in Senegal, where homosexual relationships constitute a cultural taboo. The third complaint against the film was that the Muslim hymn was used in the funeral of a Catholic person. However, these were not the reasons to demand censorship for the film. It was even more serious to present the poem of the national and

religious hero Ahmadou Bamba in the context of a lesbian relationship. As a consequence of the protest, the film's screening was restrained, and banned temporarily in the whole country for the sake of "public order". The ban turned out to be permanent, and *Karmen* has not been publicly screened in Senegal since September 2001. Domestic films have often been targeted by Senegalese film censorship, but *Karmen* was the first film banned due to the demands of a religious pressure group and not because of the authorities' decision. This turned the film into front-page news and raised a public debate regarding respect for religion and freedom of expression in Senegal.

Mourids' confusion regarding the use of Ahmadou Bamba's poem in *Karmen* must also be understood in the context of the role that religious leaders or *marabouts* have in Senegalese Mouridism. For most of the Senegalese people, practising Islam means to participate in one of the Sufi brotherhoods and follow the teachings of marabouts <sup>[iii]</sup>. In the West African Sufi tradition, brotherhoods are centred on religious teachers known as marabouts, and Senegal is probably the country where the link between marabout and disciple is stronger than in any other West African country. Characteristic of Senegalese maraboutism is that marabouts are expected to give their advice and participate in all aspects of life. Their portraits are also visible everywhere in businesses, public transport, private homes, government offices, schools and industries <sup>[iv]</sup>. Sufism was born as a reaction to the "cold" and formalist tenets of more scriptural Islam, which places great importance on the absolute gulf between man and God. In Sufi brotherhoods, this relationship is partly replaced by the close link between the disciple and his marabout, considered the intermediary in the disciple's search for *baraka* (a blessing) and his efforts to enter Paradise after a hard life on earth. Marabouts are also believed to perform miracles and bestow blessings <sup>[v]</sup> (Evers Rosander, 1997: 3-4; Westerlund, 1982; Villalón, 1999; Fatton, 1986: 749). In this context, every single issue that could be defaming the honour of one of the biggest masters will gain plenty of attention in the Senegalese public sphere.

## FROM OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP TO CULTURAL WARS

As mentioned earlier, *Karmen* was the first film banned in Senegal due to the demands of a religious pressure group. Earlier cases of censored national cinema date back to the 1970s and 1980s, and were due to the decisions of state authorities for political reasons. This time, the decision to ban *Karmen* was made by the Minister of the Interior, who feared the public disturbances caused by the *baye fall*. The case is suggestive of several internationally well-known cases in which religious or other pressure groups have tried to inhibit the making or distribution of works

of art in the U.S. and Europe. Starting with the protests against *The Birth of a Nation* (USA, 1915, D.W. Griffith) and following with controversies raised for example by *The Last Temptation of Christ* (USA, 1988, Martin Scorsese), *Basic Instinct* (USA/France, 1992, Paul Verhoeven) or *Je vous salue Marie* (France 1985, Jean-Luc Godard), a number of films around the world have been critically received by ethnic, political, religious or other activist groups, which have tried to prevent their release. These protests have rarely been as successful as in the case of *Karmen* in Senegal, but there are several similarities between them. In the following, I compare the reactions created by *Karmen* to those generated by *The Satanic Verses* and *The Last Temptations of Christ*.

First, in all three cases there is the question about *the burden of representation*: how different cultural groups or constituents are represented in the public sphere. The burden of representation is especially burning for transnational cultural products, which have to cope with the contradictory expectations of their own ethnic community at home and in diaspora, and by the host community (Naficy, 2001: 64-65/82-93; Thackway, 2003: 37; Shohat and Stam, 1994: 183). Because of historical discrimination, hostility and stereotyping, transnational ethnic communities in Western countries are often very sensitive to how they are represented in film and other media. They are aware of the fact that any negative character belonging to a certain ethnic community is rarely seen as merely an individual character; rather, it will be easily taken to represent the entire community (Sreberny, 1999: 30). The protectiveness and defensiveness of the 'home' audiences forces diasporic filmmakers to balance their compatriots' ethnic and national loyalty with their personal and artistic integrity. In the public debate, the issue of representation is often presented as a question of the verisimilitude of the representations.

In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, many Muslim critics complained that Rushdie had not told the truth about Islamic history "such as it was". They also assumed that Rushdie personally subscribed to every word in his book and, in so doing, they did not consider the fictional character of the book (Pipes, 1990: 110-112). Similarly, the opponents of *Last Temptation* claimed that Scorsese's portrayal of Jesus did not correspond with the truth. When responding to Bill Bright's offer to buy all the prints of *Last Temptation*, Universal Pictures asked: "But whose truth If everyone in America agreed on religious, political and artistic truths, there would be no need for our constitutional guarantees. Only in totalitarian states are all people forced to accept one version of the truth... In the United States, no one sect or constitution has the power to set boundaries around each person's freedom to explore religious and philosophical questions whether through speech, books or film" (Lyons, 1997: 166).

In the *Karmen* debate, the question of verisimilitude concerned religious

tolerance, homosexuality and the image of woman. Some online debate participants claimed that Senegalese Muslims and Christians have always lived together and buried their deceased together, and that for this reason the film depicts the funeral of the prison guard truthfully. Accordingly, they argued that homosexuality exists in Senegal and that there is no reason to pretend that it does not, even if it is not legally accepted. Others did not accept the idea of mixing Muslim and Christian practises nor admit that homosexuality exists in the country, and what does not exist should not be depicted in films either. There were also discussions regarding whether the image of the Senegalese woman given in the film corresponds with the reality. In several interviews, Ramaka had defined his film as a tribute to Senegalese women, mothers, aunts and mistresses he has met in his life, but for many debate participants it was shameful to compare Senegalese woman to the bisexual, impudent rebel *Karmen* and to distribute this kind of image abroad.

The second similarity between the three cases is that a cultural issue is used as a channel or pretext to discuss a current political issue, which is “in the air”. In the debate about *Last Temptation*, the American Fundamentalist-Baptists gave anti-Semitic tones to the dispute by accusing Jewish producers of “taking a swipe of our religion”. In spite of the fact that there was only one Jew associated in the production, the producer Lew Wasserman, Christian protesters labelled the film as Jewish and anti-Christian propaganda (Miles 1996: 34). In the case of Rushdie, the novel was interpreted as an effort of the West to invade in Muslim countries and to harm their cultural values. In a manner similar to Rushdie’s, Ramaka came to be labelled as a messenger of the West whose purpose was to destroy the moral of Senegalese people. *Karmen* was opposed because it was seen as a means to introduce homosexuality and other western vices in the Senegalese society.

“Homosexuality has become a culture, or let's say a sub-culture there and they want make us to accept it in all possible ways (television, papers, films like *Karmen* etc.) by using the terms like tolerance, modernity or progress. It won't work. The Senegalese sinking in these vices have better to stay where they are if they don't want to risk their life” (Mame, 28.8.01, 22.27).

“There is a powerful lobby against Islam behind *Karmen*. It's a trial balloon. You haven't asked who has financed the film” (PISCO, 15.9.01, 16.09).

Thirdly, all three cases raise questions about democracy and freedom of expression. Both opponents and defenders of the works of art demand their rights to be protected: religious people claim the right to oppose the depictions that hurt their religious feelings and the artists' defenders

demand the right to depict whatever subjects they want in the name of human rights. In democratic European societies, the dominant understanding of this dilemma is that both groups have their rights, but when expressing one's opinion or fulfilling one's conviction one should not harm the other. In some cases, the existing laws and codes have offered a solution but in some others they have also proved to be insufficient. For example, the case of *The Satanic Verses* was not possible to judge according to the British blasphemy law since it did not hurt Christian values but those of Muslims. The case raised in the UK the question whether the law should be extended to protect also other religions than Christianity (Levy, 1995, 558).

The problem with *Karmen* in Senegal was that the institutions responsible of controlling films were not functioning, and even if the case was taken to court, an official decision was not made and the situation remained unsolved. The Ministries of the Interior and of Culture did not agree on which of them was responsible of the problem, and the Committee for Cinematic Control was in a state of lethargy. The screening of *Karmen* for the reorganised Committee never took place. In the public sphere, the authorities were accused for not fulfilling their role as executors of the laws, and several claims about the lack of democracy were expressed.

In March 2002, the Senegalese Parliament accepted the new cinema legislation, which states, among other regulations, that every film needs a permit to be screened in Senegal. Permits are delivered by the Ministry responsible for the cinema and audio-visual sectors after having consulted the Committee for Cinematic Control (Biaye, 21.3.2002). According to the opinions of two Senegalese filmmakers expressed in the media, the new law will deteriorate freedom of expression in the country rather than improve it (Traore 23.2.2004, Beye 23.2.2004).

Finally, the tone of all three debates was more emotional and moralist than intellectual. Opinions were not based on facts, and the language used in the debates was laden with emotions. In India, as elsewhere, those who opposed *The Satanic Verses* felt no need to read the novel entirely, but contended with some well-chosen extracts (Pipes, 1990: 19-20). In the US, religious leaders based their arguments in the old script of *The Last Temptation* made in 1983, which in many ways differed from the final version released in 1988, and used the excerpts abolished from the final version of the film in their propaganda. This was also the case with *Karmen*: hardly any of those protesting against the film had seen it. The Internet debates were joined by people who had not even seen an excerpt of the film. This was the case with the religious leader Serigne Moustapha Diakhaté, who provoked people to act against the film. He had read in the Senegalese scandal paper *Moeurs* that in one excerpt of the film a religious song *khassaïd* was used in the funeral of a homosexual woman, and



confirmed this information by making a telephone call to the editor in chief of *Moeurs*. Diakhaté acted similarly to the members of Indian parliament, who did not consider it necessary "to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is" (Syed Shahbuddin in his letter to Rushdie, cited in Pipes, 1990: 19-20). This gave a reason to the journalist of *Frasques* to make an ironic notice: "Pape Daouda Sow (editor in chief of *Moeurs*) must be satisfied: a man as remarkable and respectful as Serigne Moustapha Diakhaté reading that paper! Besides, one has to remark that Diakhaté has acted like the late Imam Khomeini, who declared fatwa against the author of *The Satanic Verses*. The first one had not seen Joe Ramaka Gaye's film, and the second one had not read Salman Rushdie's novel, basing their decisions merely on second hand information" (*Frasques* N° 1, 10.9.2001).

Because of the fact that the opponents did not want to see the whole film, the controversial excerpt of *Karmen* was continuously cited incorrectly in public. Claims were -as in *Moeurs*, which Diakhaté used as his information source- that Ramaka combined the Catholic funeral of a homosexual woman with a holy song of Ahmadou Bamba. In reality, there are two separate excerpts in the film, which give this impression if put together, but none of them alone has the claimed content. In the first excerpt, Karmen learns about the death of Angelique through a telephone call when she is visiting her former lover Massigi. Sad and tired, she rests on the sofa listening to Massigi playing the piano and singing Ahmadou Bamba's song. During the song, the camera angle moves to the exit of the women's prison, where Angelique's chest is being carried out on the shoulders of four guards. The camera angle then returns to Massigi, and again back to the prison's outdoors. The whole scene with Kalamoune lasts about one minute. After this scene, there is a short cut to Karmen's accomplice, Old Samba, who is battered by police. Only then comes the scene of the funeral in the Catholic Church, but in the scene, Bamba's music is not heard any more: the funeral is accompanied by Catholic chants.

Religious and moral questions provoke people to use emotional language, as seen in the debates. The adversaries used personal insults, and particularly the authors and their collaborators were a target of intimidation and offences. In the *Karmen* debate, the language of the forum participants is mostly low-grade, containing insults and rude remarks against Ramaka and those defending the film. Like Rushdie, Ramaka and his family also were a target of harassing phone calls and death threats. In one web message, Ramaka was reminded about Rushdie's case and warned about the *fatwa*: "joseph a film like this with a lesbian, and still worse with a lesbian accompanied by this song! Think about it, you risk your life for nothing, it's sad. You know that FATWA threatens you" (dame faye 11.9.01, 11.35).

However harmless these messages might seem compared to the real danger experienced by Rushdie, Ramaka admitted that there was a period during which he was afraid of his own and his family's safety. Threats and insults also made Ramaka more watchful regarding his own sayings in public (interview with Ramaka, 31.3.2002).

The main difference between *Karmen* and the two other cases is that the censorship of *Karmen* remained as a local protest, while the two others spread abroad and became more or less international. *The Satanic Verses* became famous because Ayatollah Khomeini as an important Muslim leader took a visible role in the dispute, and the case became a symbol of the confrontation between Islamic and Western values even if it had started as locally as the riot against *Karmen*. In the case of *Karmen*, the accusations against the film did not touch the basic values of all Muslims - not even all Sufis, since Sufism is divided into several brotherhoods. *Karmen* hurts especially the Senegalese Mourid brotherhood, whose religious leader is used in the film in the context they cannot accept. If the film had hurt more basic Muslim values the case would certainly have raised interest also at least in those countries with remarkable Muslim minorities where it was distributed, as showed the case with Mohammed cartoons in Danmark.

[i] By Europe, I refer, in line with Shohat and Stam (1994), not only to Europe per se but also to the “neo-Europeans” of the Americas, Australia and elsewhere.

[ii] *Karmen's* website is not online any more, but the author of this work has paper printouts of all the messages sent to the site. Today, *Karmen's* website can be found in [www.stockintl.ca/fr/movies/karmen/](http://www.stockintl.ca/fr/movies/karmen/) but it does not have a discussion forum.

[iii] 57,5 % of the Senegalese people express strong confidence in religious brotherhoods, while 27,9 % express some confidence (Vengroff and Magala, 2001: 148).

[iv] The affiliation is seen also in *Karmen*: in the controversial scene where Massigi sings the poem of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the camera pans to the portraits of marabouts on the wall.

[v] The importance of the master –disciple relationship is manifested also in the name of the Mouridism, which comes from the Arabic term “mūrīd”, meaning “a disciple completely committed to following a master” (Vuillemin, 2000).

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