Session Four: Study Questions for Moolaade

1. *Moolaade* is one film director’s act of activism; Sembene speaks frankly about his stance on female genital cutting in the interview on the second DVD. He claims the practice is “passé”—it serves no useful purpose now and is unnecessary. This film clearly argues against ritual cutting, circumcision, or mutilation of young girls’ genitalia. (The terminology for the practice is itself political—many organizations prefer the term “cutting” because it makes no overt judgments about the procedure.) Here’s some background information to get some context for this particular film’s approach and argument.

According to the Federal Government’s Source for Women’s Health Information,

“There are many reasons FGC is practiced, including social, economic, and political reasons. Those who support FGC believe that it will empower their daughters, ensure the girls get married, and protect the family’s good name. In some groups, FGC is performed to show a girl’s growth into womanhood and, as in the Masai community, marks the start of a girl’s sexual debut. It also is performed to keep a woman’s virginity by limiting her sexual behavior. FGC is believed (by those who practice it) to stop a woman’s sexual desire. In some groups, women who are not cut are viewed as dirty and are treated badly. While FGC pre-dates both Christianity and Islam, religion is also used to promote the practice. Some communities believe that in order to be good Muslims, parents must have their daughters cut.

[...] FGC is often part of a community’s tradition. Most parents who support FGC believe they are protecting their daughter’s future marriage prospects, and not hurting her. It is seen by parents as part of a girl’s upbringing.”

http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/female-genital-cutting.cfm#e

There are several forms this cutting can take, and the effects can vary widely from a positive sense of belonging in the community, to infection, psychological trauma, later difficulties in child birth, and pain, injury, and lessened sexual satisfaction during intercourse.

(These two videos offer further information and help us hear how the practice is discussed in various international sources. Listen for the kinds of images, words, sources of authority, etc. these videos use.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDJyZlIPvExY, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kNMc65pNsg&feature=related – we can come back to these when we discuss documentaries and their form and content.)

**OKAY! We’re finally close to a question in all of this.** Sembene speaks of heroism in the same interview at the end of the film. He notes that “Africa is
trying to re-create itself,” and he sees heroism in “the actions men and women take every day.” He says it “takes more honesty and courage to resist the everyday without getting dirty” than it does to become, say, a war hero. In this film Sembene gives us Colle as a central hero—how does she fit his definition of hero? Do we see others in the film making heroic decisions and taking heroic stances as they move through “the everyday”? Does Sembene vilify those that oppose the hero (as melodrama might do)? How does he treat the opposition?

2. Sembene makes his films, first and foremost, for African viewers. (I was tempted to view the film as an effort to politicize FGC on an international scale—and it can do that as well—but it was useful to be reminded of his first intended audience.) He says, “As far as I am concerned, politically speaking, cinema lets me show my people their predicaments so they can take responsibility.” As you read this film (and the study questions), note all the ways Sembene reaches out to and speaks to his various African audiences.

3. Two characters function as griotte and griot in this film—Sanata and the announcer/speaker who accompanies tribal elders. These characters reflect the strength and ongoing importance of a rich oral tradition in many African cultures. Check out these sites: http://aagriots.org/griots.htm, http://www.rps.psu.edu/0205/keepers.html. How does director Ousmane Sembene use these traditional characters in his film? What do they add or emphasize? How/why might they and the songs and dances be particularly important for Africans viewing this film?

4. We talked about the ways modernization is “debated” in the films from the Indian diaspora. How does this film “debate and discuss” modernization? What is the symbolic and literal significance of the radio, for instance? Why is the character of Mercenary important in this discussion?

5. Along with the modernization depicted in Moolaade, we can read a lot of other forces at work in the story and in the characters’ challenges and experiences. Where/when do we feel the postcolonial effects of French colonization? Where/when does the film depict Islam as part of the villagers’ lives? How/when do earlier religious and cultural practices arise? (What does moolaade, mean, for instance, and where does the concept/practice come from?) What do you note regarding the complexities of the power structure in the community?

6. And one last focus: Sembene suggests that African film needs to create an African aesthetic, an African style and taste for its films. This can help films communicate across many distinct African languages and can counteract African” talkativeness”—his term, not mine. He tries to “remove all [the dialogue] that is not useful” from his films, to include “just the essentials.” He then “writes with the camera in the silences.” Note how and when this aesthetic plays out in this film—what effects does this style achieve for you and perhaps for African viewers?