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Samba Gadjigo & Jason Silverman (Dirs). *Sembene!: A Revolutionary Storyteller and a Storytelling Revolution*. 2015. Senegal & USA. 89 min.

Reviewed by Julie Solo, Independent Consultant in International Health

Imagine being banned by law from telling your stories. Then imagine the story of a man- an impassioned and imperfect man- breaking through these barriers to become the first African filmmaker, the ‘father of African film’. The film *Sembene!* tells this story, and in doing so not only brings this innovative artist and his work to a wider audience but also inspires us about the power and importance of storytelling. It is a reminder that it is not enough to make sure that people’s stories are told- what matters is that people are able to tell their own stories.

Ousmane Sembene was born in 1923 in Senegal. Expelled from school in 1936 for indiscipline and unable to follow his father’s trade as a fisherman due to seasickness, he worked as a manual laborer. In spite of his limited formal education, he loved reading and when he migrated to France in the late 1940s he became active in politics and inspired to write, publishing his first work in 1956.

Upon returning to Senegal after independence in 1960, he recognized that film was a way to reach a broader audience than his books could, given the high levels of illiteracy. However, in the French colonies, the Laval Decree legally prohibited Africans from making films of their own. But as independence spread across the continent, a spirit of revolution took many forms. Sembene set out to tell stories about the Africa he knew through film. His work spans many years and topics, from his first feature film in 1966, *Black Girl*, about a nanny who moves to France with the family that employs her, to his last film in 2004, *Moolaade*, a graphic and powerful portrayal of the harm from the practice of female genital cutting and an award winner at the Cannes Film Festival. Throughout, he addressed a range of issues around colonialism and the stories of Africans.

This film goes beyond a simple telling of those facts by largely relaying Sembene’s life story through clips from the movies he created. In this way, it is truly his own voice that tells his story. These clips effectively communicate the passion Sembene felt for filmmaking, as well as the passion the filmmakers feel for the subject.

The story is told through the lens of Samba Gadjigo, a professor of French at Mount Holyoke College and a colleague and biographer of Sembene, giving it a personal flavor. Gadjigo and co-writer, director and producer Jason Silverman spent over seven

years bringing this film to life. Silverman, the Cinematheque Director at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, had some experience as a filmmaker, but both he and Gadjigo were fairly new to the world of documentary films. As Gadjigo explains, “All we had was a vision and the enthusiasm to do it.” They were guided by a strong desire to not let Sembene’s story be forgotten. This idea is represented dramatically in the film by showing the discovery of piles of dirty and damaged film reels, which are clearly at risk of turning to dust and being lost without some care and attention.

Other voices are brought in as well, including a former protégé and Sembene’s son. Both of these show a less flattering view of Sembene. In the case of the former, Sembene made a film called *Camp de Thairoye* about a massacre of West African troops by French forces in 1944 in spite of his friend’s plan to make a film on the same subject. While Sembene’s son speaks highly of his father, he makes clear that he rarely saw the man during his childhood. This helps to round out the portrayal and avoid making a film that simply idolizes and idealizes the man.

In speaking with Samba Gadjigo, one sees the inspiration of the lessons of Sembene’s life regarding the importance of storytelling. He describes his partnership with Jason Silverman, of how they came from completely different cultural backgrounds but were able to negotiate their differences and come up with a powerful product. Gadjigo says, “I had to leave my hat as a scholar and become a storyteller.” Echoing Sembene’s own path, Gadjigo had written a biography of Sembene in 2007, but recognizing how film can reach more people than books, he and Silverman decided to make a documentary.

When asked about what people should know about Sembene, Gadjigo speaks of “his commitment to Africa and his deep conviction that art and culture and storytelling are important to the redemption of Africa... If Africans don’t tell their own stories, then Africa is going to disappear.” Sembene’s life and the making of this documentary show that “nothing is impossible with willpower.” Both Sembene’s legacy and this work by Silverman and Gadjigo show “a deep love for Africans and humanity.”

Gadjigo emphasizes the social responsibility message of Sembene. He describes the poster of Lenin on the door to Sembene’s study with a caption that captures a guiding principle for Sembene: “An artist needs to make money in order to live and work, but an artist should not live and work in order to make money.” In fact, Sembene died practically penniless because he put all the money he made back into further filmmaking and storytelling. “He is an icon of political film,” says Gadjigo.

The film had its premier in competition at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and the Cannes Festival du Film, where it was one of the top eight finalists for the Camera d’Or. It was also included on best-of-2015 lists by New York Magazine, *RogerEbert.com*, *Movie City News*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. For those interested in Africa, or film, or simply a compelling story, visit the film’s website to find local screenings or for other ways to watch the film: www.sembenefilm.com.

This year on June 9th will be the tenth anniversary of Sembene’s death. On February 25th, the documentary opened the FESPACO film festival in Burkina Faso, a biannual festival celebrating African film that is one of Sembene’s legacies. In the 1960s after gaining independence, Burkina Faso (then known as Upper Volta) nationalized its movie theaters, leading the French to institute an embargo on sending films to the

country. In response, Sembene and others brought their films to Burkina Faso in 1969 and so the festival was born. To honor the anniversary of Sembene's death, Gadjigo and Silverman have ambitious plans to screen the film all over Africa. Gadjigo explains, "He inspired us and we think we can inspire and prepare future generations." It is a good time for all of us to learn more about this important man and, in doing so, to learn an important part of African history and to be inspired in your own storytelling.

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