



THE FILMOGRAPHY OF GUINEA-BISSAU'S SANA NA N'HADA: FROM THE RETURN OF AMÍLCAR CABRAL TO THE THREAT OF GLOBAL DRUG TRAFFICKING

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This essay offers a critical assessment of the cinematic work of Sana Na N'Hada,² the first filmmaker of Guinea-Bissau³ and, together with world-renowned filmmaker Flora Gomes, one of the most important cultural producers from the West African nation. Both have been key figures in documenting the history of their nation to the point of establishing its cinematic meta-text. Whereas, Flora has received wide critical attention for many years, Sana has rarely been the object of analysis that his work deserves.⁴ This essay focuses on the greater part of Sana's filmography, including the documentary *O regresso de Amilcar Cabral* (The Return of Amílcar Cabral) (1976), the feature film *Xime* (1994), the documentary *Bissau d'Isabel* (2005), and his most recent feature film *Kadjike* (Sacred Bush) (2013), in order to examine its historical, ethical, aesthetic, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions.

Sana Na N'Hada belongs to the generation of Africans whose consciousness was shaped by the leaders of the anti-colonial movement. He was born in 1950 in the predominantly Balanta village of Enxalé, near the majestic Geba River that slices the country's central coast in half. He attended a Franciscan primary school for "indigenous" students against the will of his father, who preferred that he work the land. During Sana's early school years, he was taught by professors who were active in the emerging liberation movement. In the 1960s, he joined the guerrillas for five years to work as a medical

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² I would like to warmly thank director Sana Na N'Hada for his kind generosity in providing me with copies of all his films discussed throughout this essay and for the extensive interview I conducted with him during my visit to Bissau in 2016.

³ See the essay by Filomena Embaló, "O cinema da Guiné-Bissau" featured in the volume, *Flora Gomes: o cineasta visionário* (19).

⁴ See the page written by Filomena Embaló, "Cinema da Guiné-Bissau," <https://misoafricapt.wordpress.com/cinema-da-guine-bissau-filomena-embalo/> and the article by Anne Laerke Koefoed's, "Under the Radar: Sana Na N'Hada is one of Africa's Most Important Filmmakers Today," <http://africasacountry.com/2015/03/sana-na-nhada-guinea-bissaus-revolutionary-filmmaker-is-one-of-africas-most-important-directors-today/>



assistant. At age 17 he was sent by Amílcar Cabral to Cuba in order to finish high school and pursue film studies, together with three other young men and women (including Flora Gomes). In an interview, Sana states: "I discovered the outside world in Cuba."⁵ The film careers of both Sana Na N'Hada and Flora Gomes were indelibly marked by their experiences in Guinea-Bissau's liberation struggle against Portuguese colonialism, as well as their formative education in Cuba.

Cinema throughout Portuguese or Portuguese Creole-speaking Africa, similarly to cinema in Francophone Africa, has tended to be author driven and highly attentive to social, political, and historical issues pertaining to the nation, while offering a variety of aesthetic, formal, and entertainment approaches. The memory of colonialism and its legacy, as well as the failures and promises of postcoloniality, remain a constant theme in the work of the two towering figures of Bissau-Guinean cinema, Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'Hada. On the other hand, the cinematic production volume throughout Lusophone Africa as a whole remains quite small in comparison to production in Francophone and Anglophone areas of sub-Saharan Africa. It also continues to be heavily dependent on co-productions with European nations, especially in the case of Guinea-Bissau.⁶ By the same token, as of 2017, there are signs that the Lusophone African cinematic sphere is seeing the emergence of low-budget video films following in the footsteps of Nollywood, un beholden to state-funding, whether national or international.⁷

⁵ Interview with filmmaker at Hotel Coimbra (Bissau) in June, 2016.

⁶ The mega-production *Njinga: Rainha de Angola* (Njinga, Queen of Angola) (2013) directed by Portuguese Sérgio Graciano is a major exception to the co-production model with Portugal, Brazil, or France, in that it was entirely funded by Angolan public and private sources and produced by Semba Comunicação. Angola is also becoming a TV power house in Lusophone Africa through highly sophisticated *novelas* that have been exported to Brazil and Portugal (*Windeck* (2013) and *Jikumessu* (2014), both nominated for Emmy awards. These are currently being dubbed into English and French for their distribution throughout the African continent, as evidenced by Semba's presence at FESPACO (Ouagadougou) in 2017. It is uncertain whether the Angolan government will continue to invest in audiovisual production due to the severe economic crisis caused by declining oil prices. Angola is almost exclusively dependent on revenues from oil exports.

⁷ For a discussion on the emerging amateur or semi-professional digital production of film series, documentaries, or short films in Guinea-Bissau, see Paulo Cunha and Catarina Laranjeiro (2016).

The reigning economic, material, and geopolitical conditions at the time of birth and subsequent development of cinema in the former Portuguese colonies were, as I argue in *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence* (2011, 108), much more precarious than those in the rest of Africa. Yet, the experience of armed struggle that marked the origins of cinema in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau during the 1960s and 1970s significantly contrasts with the cinema produced in other African nations during their early independence years. The lack of training in filmmaking and of infrastructure, on the one hand, and the cohesion and unity of purpose within the MPLA in Angola, FRELIMO in Mozambique, and PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, on the other hand, inspired such a wave of international solidarity that filmmakers and activists from France, Sweden, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Italy, the US, and other countries, were involved in the production of numerous documentaries as well as in training filmmakers (Andrade-Watkins, 181; Cunha & Laranjeiro, 9-12). They committed their talent and resources to the liberation movements' emancipatory vision, advancing an ideologically complex strategy: the use of film as a tool or even as a strategic weapon in order to document and disseminate information about the war, making it possible to educate the African public about their own historical condition, while informing the international community about the anti-colonial wars in Africa.⁸ It is also crucial to note that the emergence of anti-colonial and postcolonial cinema in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, coincided with the modernization and revitalization of the cinematic medium underway in the 1960s and 1970s, as pointed out by Marcus Power (272). In this way, cinema became a key representational vehicle for the advancement of the national liberation cause, which galvanized international support.

The foundational filmic text for independent Guinea-Bissau is the documentary *O regresso de Amílcar Cabral* (The Return of Amílcar Cabral) (1976), co-directed by five Bissau-Guinean filmmakers, including Sana Na N'Hada and Florentino "Flora"

⁸ For more information on the early history of film production in post-independent Lusophone Africa, see José Mena Abrantes (1986), Manthia Diawara (1992a), Frank Ukadike (1994), Claire Andrade-Watkins (1995), José Matos-Cruz & José Maria Abrantes (2002), Ros Gray (2011) and Mohamed Bamba (2011).



Gomes.⁹ It is based on a series of news reports that Sana edited in Sweden in order to create a coherent filmic whole. The documentary, mixing live footage mostly in muted color with black and white still photos, features the return to Bissau of the slain liberation leader's corpse in 1976 from Conakry, the capital of Francophone Guinea (where he was assassinated in 1973). A significant portion of the film focuses on the emotionally charged procession through the streets of Bissau witnessed by tens of thousands of mourners (military, civilians, diplomats, elderly, young), in addition to the official state funeral. (Sana Na N'Hada filmed scenes from Conakry to Bissau and Flora Gomes filmed the airport scenes.) The solemnity pervading the 30-minute "hagiographic" documentary, underscored by the musical soundtrack of the mythical band Super Mama Djombo, "Amílcar Cabral bu mori sedu" (Amílcar Cabral You Died Too Soon)¹⁰, is interspersed with beautiful black and white still images and film clips of the charismatic leader smiling, in action on the battlefield, as well as educating, training, and warmly commingling with liberation fighters. In addition, there are film clips of speeches — either in Guinean Kriol or in Portuguese. In one speech, Cabral admonishes soldiers not to fall prey to colonialist propaganda against the PAIGC liberation movement.¹¹ In another speech that he gave shortly before his assassination, Cabral commemorates the ten years of the armed struggle, unilaterally declaring independence on behalf of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. In another speech to villagers, Cabral extols the importance of liberation from fear and of the struggle for education. He adds that "educators are fighters too" and are "crucial for the country's future." This foundational film mourns the beloved pan-African leader, but also celebrates independence and the realization of Cabral's utopian dream of the bi-national state of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, now retrospectively ephemeral. The film

⁹ The five directors of *O regresso de Amílcar Cabral* were: Sana Na N'Hada, Florentino "Flora" Gomes, José Bolama Cubumba, Djalma Martins Fetterman, and Josefina Lopes Crato.

¹⁰ The song "Amílcar Cabral bu mori sedu" was written/composed by Tony Lima. Today, it is also a sample of a rap song from 2011 featuring Chullage, LBC, and Kaya (available on YouTube), signaling the continued political and cultural relevance, as well as iconic power of Cabral for younger generations of Bissau-Guineans, Cape Verdeans, diasporic Africans in Portugal, and Afro-Portuguese.

¹¹ PAIGC (Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné Bissau e Cabo Verde) was the founding party of independent Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Both countries became a bi-national state between 1975-80. Since the end of the bi-national experiment, the party has retained the acronym in Guinea-Bissau while in Cape Verde it changed to PAICV.

ends with an iconic still image of the beloved hero (seen below).¹² As described by Cunha and Laranjeiro, Cabral emerges as a messianic figure “onde reside toda a força política e anímica da construção do novo país soberano e independente” (15).¹³

FILM CLIP CABRAL (Courtesy of Sana Na N’Hada)

Amílcar Cabral was fully aware of the power of cinema as an educational and propaganda tool. Therefore, he sent several young men and women to study filmmaking in Cuba at ICAIC (or Cuban Film Institute,¹⁴ under the mentorship of legendary director Santiago Alvarez).¹⁵ These were José Bolama Cubumba, Josefina Lopes Crato, Sana Na N’Hada, and Flora Gomes (the first two now deceased). This would be a seminal moment in the history of Bissau-Guinean cinema, according to Filipa César.¹⁶ Years later, in 1978, shortly after independence, Sana, together with the Angolan Mário Pinto de Andrade, founded the National Film Institute of Guinea-Bissau, which he directed until 1989. Between the 1970s and 1990s, Sana co-directed and directed several short documentaries and a short feature film.¹⁷ Sana was also assistant director to Flora Gomes in his

¹² Flora Gomes is currently at the pre-production phase of a documentary on the life of Amílcar Cabral.

¹³ “who galvanizes the full political and emotional force behind the newly sovereign and independent nation.”

¹⁴ Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas

¹⁵ See Anne Laerke Koefoed.

¹⁶ See description of Filipa César’s archival film project focusing on the history of militant cinema in Guinea-Bissau, “Luta ca caba inda” (The Struggle is not Over Yet): <http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?page=article&idArt=1639>

See her 30-minute documentary essay titled, *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* (2016), based on statements and documents that are presented by a young boy through a low fidelity channel. Also, see Filipa César’s remarkable short experimental film, *Conakry* (2013), based on forgotten raw video footage from the Bissau-Guinean liberation struggle and early post-independence from 1972-80 as a poetic exercise in memory recovery, in collaboration with San Tomean-Portuguese writer and artist Grada Kilomba and US radio activist Diana McCarty.

The collective film *Spell Reel* (2017) assembled by Filipa César, together with Anita Fernandez, Flora Gomes, and Sana Na N’Hada, further develops her on-going meditation on the ruins of a film archive that was crucial to the decolonization of Guinea-Bissau and what it may portend for the future.

¹⁷ Sana co-directed with Florentino “Flora” Gomes, Josefina Lopes Crato, and José Bolama Cubumba, *Anos no osa luta* (We Dare to Struggle), a 15’ documentary released in 1976. Sana also directed *Os dias de Anconó* (The Days of Anconó), a 26-minute documentary commissioned by UNESCO and *Fanado* (Initiation), a 26-minute documentary, currently available at the Arsenal Film Archive in Berlin.



pioneering feature film, *Mortu Nega* (Those Whom Death Refused) (1988), in addition to *Po di sangui* (Blood Tree) (1996). In addition, Sana collaborated with French maverick film director Chris Marker in the outstanding mixed-genre experimental essay-film *Sans soleil* (Sunless) (1982), recently voted one of the five best documentaries ever made.¹⁸ Chris Marker borrowed from Sana footage of Bissau Carnival—one of the most extraordinary in Africa—for a film that explores by contrast and analogy experiences of time and spiritual belief systems, particularly between Japan and West Africa. Marker returned several times to Guinea-Bissau taking on the role of mentor and film professor to the four founding directors of the country's national cinema. According to Sana, they would all watch films together and subsequently discuss them (including Marker's own movies). Years later, when Sana was visiting Paris, Marker made a list of films for him to see so that they could afterwards discuss them. This particular relationship became significant in the history of cinema in Guinea-Bissau.

Sana Na N'Hada's first feature film, *Xime* (1994), was distinguished at the Cannes Film Festival under the rubric, "Un certain regard" and is Sana's most remarkable work both formally and aesthetically. A Bissau-Guinean-Dutch co-production, *Xime*, co-written by Sana and Joop van Wijk, is a historical film set in 1962—the year before the beginning of Guinea-Bissau's liberation war.¹⁹ The opening scene, interspersed with the credits, takes place at dawn in old Bissau where a young man is painting graffiti on the wall with the word "Independência." His paint brush playfully moves from the wall to the camera lens by splashing it, as if extending the graffiti wall onto the screen and thereby imbuing it with the euphoric political desire that propels the film as a whole.

Xime posits some of Amílcar Cabral's dilemmas in the attempt to rally a budding nation across many ethnic and cultural differences and beyond traditional belief systems and customs.

¹⁸ See Laerke Roefoed's article.

¹⁹ Flora Gomes was assistant director of *Xime*, in addition to António Reis, Suleimane Biai, and Juan Carlos Tajés.



FILM CLIP XIME (Courtesy of Hillie Molenaar & Joop van Wijk, Molenwiek Film, Amsterdam)

In fact, the second scene (also interspersed between the opening credits) depicts the silhouettes of young liberation fighters projected against the wall. The silhouettes show headwear indicating ethnicity (Fulani or Balanta, for instance), while they discuss in Kriol Cabral's exhortation to speak the various vernacular languages and return to the villages (or *tabankas* in Guinean Kriol) of their respective ethnic groups to convince the elders of the importance of the fight for independence. Cabral was fully aware of the enormous ethnic and linguistic diversity of Guinea-Bissau,²⁰ where Kriol was not yet as widespread as it would eventually become in the course of the liberation struggle.²¹ As a result, young activists were sent to their respective ethnically-based villages (Tomás, 148). In the case of the Balanta people, who are the centerpiece of the film *Xime* (an actual Balanta village), the character Raul (activist-guerrilla) is forced to contend with a strict age-based hierarchical power system, which proves challenging, as the film contends. Nonetheless, the Balanta people became the engine that would propel the PAIGC revolution, given their long history of opposition against Portuguese colonialism (161). According to Temudo (52, cited by Green, 28), Amílcar Cabral was particularly struck by the level of Balanta support toward the anti-colonial struggle; they were in fact the first ethnic group to fully support the armed struggle in the 1960s. Patrick Chabal argues that because of the group's age-grade system it was only until the elders were convinced that they should support the nationalists that "the relevant age-group leaders could easily recruit among their peers" (70). Eventually, all ethnic groups rallied around the liberation cause.

²⁰ Robert J. C. Young points out that Cabral's detailed knowledge of the cultural diversity in Guinea-Bissau was largely based on his extensive agricultural survey for the colonial Forestry Department (285). Antonio Tomás argues that such experience enabled Cabral to interact with the most influential leaders of various ethnic groups across the land (91). Also, see Cabral's essay, "Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea," (published in English in 1969) for a comparative discussion of the power structure within Balanta and Fulani societies, arguably, Guinea-Bissau's two most influential ethnic groups.

²¹ The foremost linguistic authority on Guinean Kriol, Luigi Scantamburlo, argues that through the national liberation struggle Kriol became the country's lingua franca, and that the capital city of Bissau today, as the nation's largest urban area, as well as its economic, political, and media center, has become the bastion of Kriol, where most of its native speakers are concentrated (30). (Also, based on conversations with Scantamburlo and Sana Na N'Hada).



Indeed, there is general consensus around the claim that the nation of Guinea-Bissau emerged through the anti-colonial war.²²

The narrative structure of *Xime* is built around two parallel stories that eventually intersect. The first one takes place in the film's eponymous village, featuring Iala, a widower and father of Bedan and Raul. The younger son, Bedan, will soon be initiated into adulthood, while the elder son, Raul, is a seminarian in Bissau. Following tradition, Iala is offered a young woman, N'Dai, as a bride, even though she and Iala's son Bedan are far more interested in each other. Both youngsters are against the arranged marriage, but they feel powerless under the weight of tradition.²³ While N'Dai sings her sorrows, Bedan continues to flirt with her. In the meantime, Raul has mysteriously disappeared since joining the anti-colonial movement. Raul eventually becomes a crucial figure in *Xime* in his attempt to bring the village over to the liberation cause, and because of that, he also emerges as a lightning rod that unleashes the ire of colonial authorities against the village.

The second main storyline is anchored in Portuguese colonial society, featuring the regional administrator Cunha, businessman Silva, Lieutenant Borges, and priest Vittorio. The first three men appear as one-dimensional caricatures representing key aspects of the Portuguese colonial state. These men are vessels of colonialist and racist ideologies. Administrator Cunha's black servant and interpreter, José Manuel, for instance, is the object of some of the film's most injurious comments. By the same token, Cunha is the object of the film director's derision and humor. Close-ups of Cunha's face are often juxtaposed with close-up images of a frog, a lizard, or an insect. One scene depicts Cunha as he films locals harvesting rice patties. His gaze exoticizes them at the same time as the director metafilmically critiques the colonial gaze. While the administrator and lieutenant defend the interests of a Portuguese colonial state that barely controls

²² Sana Na N'Hada states that Amílcar Cabral was a unifying figure of all ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau that Portuguese colonialism was keen on dividing. He argues further that the nation was forged through the liberation war. In his pioneering biography of Cabral, Patrick Chabal argues that, in fact, Bissau-Guinean society was transformed during the liberation struggle rather than after the struggle (10).

²³ Arranged marriages crossing generational lines leading to conflict between elderly parents and adult children are the centerpiece of the classic African film, *Tilai* (1990), directed by Idrissa Ouédraogo from Burkina Faso. In this particular case, the marriage in question eventually leads to the downfall of the whole community.

its West African territory, the businessman defends his own personal interests as he rails against the utter incompetence of the colonial government. He mockingly asks the administrator "what is happening in Bissau?" But Cunha appears to be clueless. The administrator states that the governor wants to exert more control over the "indigenous people" and is planning to conduct a census, but this plan has been inexplicably delayed.

In contrast, the priest Vittorio emerges as the most complex character in the film. The only white character who speaks fluent Kriol, Vittorio has a foothold in both Portuguese and Guinean worlds, being able to see both sides of the colonial and anti-colonial divide. (According to Sana Na N'Hada, Vittorio is inspired by his own elementary school teacher who sympathized with the liberation cause.) In one of the more important scenes of *Xime*, administrator Cunha and Vittorio discuss in a very slow, cartoonish enunciation one of the priest's former students, Raul, who is wanted by the colonial authorities as a "subversive." The priest defends opening students' eyes through education, while taking no responsibility for what their eyes see. In another important scene Vittorio and Raul walk through a bucolic setting across the rice fields. A discussion takes place in which the priest expresses skepticism vis-à-vis the liberation war. He believes that even if liberation forces are victorious, post-independence power may nevertheless fall into the hands of unscrupulous middlemen, represented by the figure of the African colonial soldier, who is given the generic name of *Cipaio*.²⁴ While the priest takes refuge in his religious faith, Raul's faith resides within the struggle. At the end, Vittorio confesses that one day he may ultimately understand the struggle.

Xime not only underscores the chasm between a weak and ineffective Portuguese colonial power structure and an overwhelmingly rural native population steeped in traditional culture, virtually untouched by the West, but it also highlights the chasm between different generations of Guineans as well as between tradition and modernity — the latter articulated in Cabral's vision of

²⁴ The term *Cipaio*, derived from Hindi, signifies "soldier." In the Portuguese colonial context in Africa it meant a (black) "African colonial soldier." In Sana's film *Xime* the use of the term is generic for the character in question, who becomes objectified as a "colonial soldier type."



the future nation to emerge from the liberation struggle.²⁵ Tensions mount when the colonial administration intrudes into the lives of villagers in the hinterland, while a son of the villagers who has been educated by a Catholic order attempts to raise awareness of the oppressed condition of Africans under colonialism. Tensions escalate to the point of rupture, thus unleashing the war for independence.

The specific conflict in *Xime* is caused by road construction plans overseen by the Lieutenant, who delegates the task to *Cipaio*. The armed *Cipaio*, who is portrayed to a large extent as an inept buffoon, orders villagers to build the road, even though they are in the midst of harvesting rice at the height of the dry season, which is ideal for such critical activity. This situation stirs anger among villagers and is reminiscent of the classic film *Emitai* (1971) by Ousmane Sembene, in which the arrogance on the part of the French colonial authorities, as well as their obliviousness toward the livelihood of Africans, lead to a state of rebellion. In the case of the Casamance region in southern Senegal (where *Emitai* takes place) and Guinea-Bissau, rice is the most important staple, thus playing a pivotal role in the lives of the rural population.

Meanwhile, Raul, the wayward son who is plotting revolution, arrives near the village wearing a beanie (or *sumbia*) similar to that of Amílcar Cabral. He asks wary fishermen why they acquiesce to whites who dictate the price of fish. Later on, Raul and his message of liberation are rejected by his father Iala and the elders. In the interim, administrator Cunha arrives at the village demanding that Iala pay a fine on behalf of his son Raul for his subversive activities. Subsequently, tensions escalate to the point of rupture when in the middle of Iala's wedding to the young bride N'Dai, *Cipaio* shoots Raul dead, and in turn, *Cipaio* is killed by the young villagers. Lieutenant Borges arrives at this turning point and threatens to shoot the whole village. Instead, he throws a firebomb at Iala's house. This chaotic climatic sequence entails the beginning of the liberation war. Bedan has the last word: "É bias, é guerra" (It's time for war). The final scene depicts the house, which metonymically encapsulates the village and the country as a whole, engulfed in flames.

²⁵ For Cabral's own discussion on the role of culture as a factor of resistance to colonialism, as well as the relationship of culture to power and its social and economic effects, see "National Liberation and Culture" (1973).

Xime stands out for its superlative aesthetic qualities, particularly the camera work and lighting (by the talented Melle van Essen). Maria do Carmo Piçarra argues that the beauty of the images softens the hardship of the villagers' lives (123). The film, in fact, exudes charisma and warmth, thanks especially to the framing that privileges close-ups of characters' faces, which are enhanced by the exquisite chiaroscuro lighting to the point of constituting the film's stylistic mark. Sana Na N'Hada's film exemplifies the Deleuzian notion (via Eisenstein) of the close-up encompassing the face and vice-versa, while together being the equivalent of the concept of affection-image, comprising a combination of the "immobile unity" of the face with "intensive expressive movements" (Deleuze, 87). *Xime*, in fact, exhibits a preponderance of medium-to-extreme close-ups that punctuate a wide spectrum of emotional instances ranging from foreboding, fear, and secretive complicity to joy, compassion, and defiance, among many others. One could argue, along with philosopher Emmanuel Levinas,²⁶ who wrote extensively on the ethics of responsibility toward the other and the encounter of the other's face that "L'épiphanie du visage comme visage ouvre l'humanité" (the epiphany of the face as face, opens humanity) (30). This particular insight is most apt in thinking about the power of the close-up and its relevance for understanding the ethical-aesthetic strategy on the part of director Sana Na N'Hada and his politics of representation in *Xime*. The close-ups grant most of his characters a sense of uniqueness and grace, eliciting the audience's interest, empathy, and identification with the black Guinean subjects represented on-screen in a film about the beginning of the most successful African liberation war against European colonialism.

The close-up as affective representational strategy is also featured in the opening scene of *Bissau d'Isabel* (2005).²⁷ It is a powerful documentary that encompasses poetic, ethical, and educational elements in connection to the multicultural mosaic of the country's capital city —as a microcosm of the nation— centered on the life experience of its eponymous subject. From the start, the documentary establishes a pact of empathy and regard on the part of the audience toward Isabel in a deeply moving scene featuring a long

²⁶ I would like to thank Charlie Sugnet for reminding me of the relevance of Levinas' phenomenology of the face-to-face encounter with the other in thinking of Sana's privileging of the close-up in his cinematography.

²⁷ The assistant director of *Bissau d'Isabel* is Suleimane Biai.



take (35 seconds) and extreme close-up of her teary-eyed face staring into space with the constant sound of small waves breaking against the river bank. This particular scene synthesizes the film's emotional force while effectively drawing the audience visually and sonically into Isabel's innermost emotional sphere, as well as into the collective universe of Guinea-Bissau.

FILM CLIP BISSAU D'ISABEL (With permission by LX Filmes)

While the film is intimate in scale as it follows Isabel's everyday routine and as the audience becomes privy to her life story, Isabel also becomes the axis through which the country is portrayed at a macro-level in myriad historical, political, social, and cultural details.

The following scene features a high angle shot above a shipping container with hundreds of sacks of cashew nuts (which are the primary export product of Guinea-Bissau to the world) and dozens of workers loading the sacks as well as the containers onto the ships anchored at the port. At the same time we hear the song "Nha mame" (My Mother) by legendary singer-songwriter Zé Manel honoring hard-working Guinean women as the foundation of daily life, along with the children who help out their mothers by selling peanuts or beans in the streets. The subsequent scene features a large canoe carrying numerous passengers and stacks of straw arriving at the port of Bissau. Simultaneously, with the sound of the kora playing in the background, a narrator in voice-off tells the story in Portuguese of the first inhabitants who landed in what would later become "Ulau, Ussau, Bissau." There is an implosion of temporalities between past and present; while the narrator tells the foundational story of Bissau centuries ago, we see the images of its contemporary inhabitants. What may appear as a cinematic narrative disjuncture is ultimately a strategy to establish a link between the long historical continuum²⁸ and the present of the land and its people.

Bissau d'Isabel offers a strong ethnographic dimension featuring many prominent facets of everyday life such as the city's lively informal economy, with scenes of the fish market at Pindjiguiti port and the main market of Bandim, highlighting the *djilas* (or itinerant male traders, many of them Muslim from Guinea-Conakry)²⁹

²⁸ Term used by Toby Green (3).

²⁹ See Raul Mendes Fernandes (111).

and the *bideras* (female street vendors). *Bideras* (which means literally in Kriol, “women of life”) are inveterate saleswomen, omnipresent throughout the African continent, who depend on small transactions to support their families. Raul Fernandes argues that *bideras* operate within a territory where boundaries between domestic space and public market space collapse. *Bideras* struggle for life in order to provide sustenance to themselves and their families; their profession in the public sphere is in fact an extension of their domestic domain (110-111). Most *bideras* are the head of their households, in many cases single mothers. Some have college degrees. Isabel, who has a vegetable garden plot to supplement the family's food supply, works as a *bidera* on the side, selling surplus vegetables at the local market for extra income. Her children help her out with the family garden plot.

Bissau d'Isabel features two major Bissau-Guinean paradigmatic collective rituals in which people of all ethnic groups and religions participate: carnival and *toka txur* (“mourning”). Both scenes are framed as emblematic of the nation's multiethnic and ecumenical character. The brief carnival scene depicts massive crowds milling around the heart of the city with people playing drums, dancing, or watching carnival groups parade. There is a transition toward black-and-white footage of Amílcar Cabral speaking in French about the relationship between politics and culture. In the film clip he articulates his well-known belief that the liberation struggle is not only political but also cultural. Cabral states that there is and isn't a tribal/ethnic problem in Guinea-Bissau. He believes that “tribalism” is used by political opportunists, adding that colonial powers have historically taken advantage of tribal differences or divisions. He warns his people that they must remain vigilant about such problems in Guinea-Bissau. Later, a *bombolom* player emerges as an intradiegetic narrator describing the Bissau-Guinean animistic ritual of *toka txur*. It is a collective celebration that commemorates a loved one who has passed away. It involves music based on the rhythms of the *bombolom* (a large hollow tree trunk with an opening at the top played horizontally with sticks), dancing, chanting, the killing of cows, pigs and/or goats, with a feast including food and drink shared by all. The *bombolom* player, facing the camera, describes *toka txur* as a ritual to ensure that the deceased one finds peace on his or her way to reincarnation (in the animistic belief system of Guinea-Bissau, each newborn is the reincarnation of another being). He states further that



there are different rhythmic patterns of playing the *bombolom* in accordance with age and/or gender of the deceased person. Subsequently, the extra diegetic narrator returns, asserting that the *toka txur* is an occasion in which social, cultural, political, religious, and ethnic differences are set aside. Forgiveness and reconciliation prevail. Ultimately, *Toka txur* is one of Guinea-Bissau's key unifying rituals at a time when politics have become "ethnicized" to a certain degree, and pose a threat to the nation's unity — a concern that was voiced by the nation's founder (as described earlier) and fully shared by director Sana Na N'Hada.

As the documentary moves from the macrological to the micrological levels, Isabel Nabali Nhaga emerges as a figure that is emblematic of the nation as a whole; her life story is in many ways the story of Guinea-Bissau. Isabel is primarily a nurse at the country's main hospital. Similarly to Sana, she joined the PAIGC forces and worked as a medical aid. Later on, she was sent to Cuba to become a nurse. After returning to Guinea-Bissau she worked in the liberated zones during the war's final years. Isabel and her companions (including Sana) embodied the hopes and dreams of the generation of Amílcar Cabral. Yet, ever since independence her life has been an endless struggle in which her salary, when paid, is insufficient to support her family (including her unemployed Cuba-educated agronomist husband and several college-age children). Sana's documentary celebrates Isabel's strength, kindness, intelligence, and determination. Her values are those of Cabral, i.e. the overarching importance of education and an ethos of egalitarianism across genders, ethnicities, religions, etc. Nevertheless, the film also laments the personal and historical tragedy that has befallen Isabel and her country. Isabel is a paragon of hard work, honesty, and resilience, but her country has been unfair, corrupt, and, at times, violent and hateful toward its own people. The film elicits a great deal of admiration from the audience toward Isabel, and through her, toward the country as a whole.

Sana Na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, as well as countless other African intellectuals, writers, artists, and filmmakers, bemoan the insurmountable gap between the dreams and hopes of a fair and egalitarian post-independence society and the reality of greed, venality, and injustice that has prevailed in numerous postcolonial African nations. Given the heroic circumstances of Guinea-Bissau's

independence, which was seen as a “hope-filled harbinger of Africa's potential,” in the words of Toby Green (229), this reality is particularly stinging. Postcolonial critic Albert Memmi lucidly wonders, “Why, if the colonial tree produced bitter fruit, has the tree of independence provided us only with stunted and shriveled crops?” (21).

Sana Na N’Hada’s most recent feature film, *Kadjike* (Sacred Bush) (2013), presents a dramatic confrontation between tradition and one of the most perverse manifestations of global modernity. It was shot almost entirely on the Bijagós archipelago off the coast of Guinea-Bissau and focuses on the clash between traditional Bijagó culture and the global drug trafficking network as it intrudes upon the lives of the inhabitants of this pristine corner of the planet. The remote and largely unknown Bijagós archipelago comprises 88 islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau with a high diversity of ecosystems from mangroves, mudflats, and palm forests to coastal savanna, sandbanks, and aquatic zones, with a unique fauna, including the salt water hippopotamus, the African manatee, the Atlantic hump-backed dolphin, and marine turtles. The Bijagós constitute one of the most important destination points for migratory birds in Africa.³⁰ In 1996 UNESCO declared this unique region a Biosphere Reserve.

Visually, the film *Kadjike* capitalizes on this stunning location with sweeping wide-angle landscape shots of beach and ocean views, along with island tropical forests, including the majestic kapok trees. According to Anne Laerke Roefoed, “The poignancy of this film lies in the juxtaposition between the natural beauty of the archipelago and the imminent dangers that lurk in the shadows of this fragile world” (4). In fact, the natural landscape and the environment play a key role throughout the film, becoming a character in and of themselves in the defense of the symbiotic relationship between traditional society and culture and the archipelago itself against the intrusion of destructive forces of modernity. In the film *Kadjike* the Bijagós archipelago emerges as a powerful example of the notion of “natureculture,” as conceptualized by Donna Haraway (2003), to emphasize the intrinsic interdependence between both dimensions.

³⁰ See *The Protected Areas of Guinea-Bissau: Guide to Ecotourism*.



Kadjike's story is framed in an atemporal place in harmony with God Nindo's creation, according to Bijagó animistic cosmogony, where time moves at a slow pace following the cycles of nature. In fact, the opening scene features an extraordinary shot of the starry sky, followed by a long take with close-up images of a crab emerging from a hole on the sandy beach. The voice-off narrator in Kriol (Sana himself) tells the Bijagó creation myth. Acapacama, the original female inhabitant, founded the first village of Nocau. Before it was time for her to leave the world, she charged her four daughters with the care of tradition, the ocean, the forest, and the wind. Acapacama's heritage was to be protected by her descendants. The Bijagó society at the center of *Kadjike* not only lives in harmony with its natural ecosystem, but is also portrayed as an egalitarian society in terms of gender relations and roles. According to Álvaro Nóbrega, the geographic isolation of the Bijagó archipelago and the general lack of modern infrastructure have contributed to the preservation of traditional social structures on the islands, including its matrifocal configuration (84). However, in the film *Kadjike*, Bijagó society is descending into conflict.

There are two narrative coming-of-age threads that run parallel in *Kadjike* involving the young men Ankina and Toh. Ankina has been chosen to be initiated into becoming a medicine man and he struggles to live up to the task. Meanwhile, Omi, his girlfriend, is interested in marrying him despite a prohibition against marrying a would-be-initiate. Toh, on the other hand, is restless and rebellious. He is tired of living on the islands under the rule of the elders and is eager to explore the world. Both stories become entangled through the intrusion of a couple of outsiders from the capital city, Togon and Assumé, who bribe the local state authorities so that they may purchase a strategic piece of land on a sacred island in order to run a cocaine transshipment operation. While Ankina must learn the secret power of the snake, Toh becomes involved with the drug trafficking couple. He is seduced with promises of traveling the world, but in reality the couple is more interested in using him as a mule. In the meantime, Ankina, as he emerges as a new community leader after being initiated, discovers the drug trafficking operation and becomes determined to mobilize his people to oust the intruders so as to save Nocau. As a Bijagó man tells Ankina, all islands are being desecrated by "foreigners" and that there is no more room for traditions.



As the action unfolds *Kadjike* also offers cultural, ethnographic, and ecological insights into the everyday life of Bijagó society, featuring, for instance, a ceremony in honor of the first mother Acapacama and her four daughters, scenes of women and boys crushing palm fruit for palm oil, young men picking oysters, women fishing with nets, the elders deliberating and consulting with the village priestess. Basic ecological insights offered by the film include: planting several trees in order to replace the majestic kapok that is to be cut for a canoe; not cutting the root of mangrove trees where oysters grow and are later harvested; leaving the land fallow so that the soil may regenerate; and the notion of itinerant agriculture, where the land is collectively owned based on customary law.

During the mid-2000 decade the Bijagós archipelago became a nodal point in the international drug trafficking network between Latin America and Europe, as Guinea-Bissau emerged as a transshipment depot along the West African coast. Given the island territory's remote location and defenselessness in the context of a weak nation-state, with little control over its borders and where government has been prone to corruption, Guinea-Bissau offered an ideal platform for drug traffickers. As Joshua Forrest points out, this transnational threat underscores "the strong links among political instability, economic vulnerability, and state fragility" (197). Hassoum Ceesay remarks that Guinea-Bissau's fragility has, in fact, made it a "hunting ground for drug traffickers, a fragility which their presence has since exacerbated" (219). Indeed, Guinea-Bissau remains a weak democracy due to on-going cycles of chronic political unpredictability and economic stagnation, alongside continued dependence on foreign aid. Forrest argues that the history of post-liberation Guinea-Bissau has been characterized by a tendency toward an authoritarian centralization of executive power, punctuated by multiple coup attempts, in addition to the short civil war that took place between 1998-99 (171). More recently, the cycles of institutional crises and political violence in connection to the internal struggle for power have become exacerbated by drug trafficking and its close proximity to circles of power (Ceesay, 220). After a brief period of political and economic stabilization, as well as generalized optimism in 2014, the country appears to be once again undergoing a period of political stalemate at the executive level and economic stagnation as of 2017. In the meantime, drug trafficking appears to have become less conspicuous in Guinea-Bissau since the mid-2010 decade, with



foreign traffickers driven away. Nevertheless, Davin O'Regan states that there remain local operators tied to the drug trade, and that the phenomenon of drug trafficking should be understood within a larger regional context that is constantly in flux (2014).³¹ The independent weekly newspaper *Última Hora* reported on a United Nations study conducted in 2015, concluding that Guinea-Bissau remains at the mercy of organized crime due to weaknesses in the judicial system, corruption, and political instability.³²

Through the film *Kadjike Sana Na N'Hada* not only deploys a "cautionary pedagogy" for the people of Guinea-Bissau,³³ but also sends an "alarm signal" to the world, offering a fictionalized story based on numerous anecdotal accounts about the increase of drug consumption among youth, as well as incidents involving drug trafficking throughout the islands. For instance, a mysterious airplane stuck on the runway of Bubaque airport (Bubaque is the economic center of the Bijagó archipelago), where the local youth were asked to help free the plane from the mud; a local fisherman who discovered bags of white powder being thrown into the sea from small airplanes; or locals discovering bags of white powder on the islands, not quite knowing what the "white powder" was.

Kadjike posits the Bijagós islands as a microcosm of what the nation should be: an ideal society living in harmony with nature and the environment, while preserving to a large extent its customs and traditions, including a shared power structure between men and women. At the same time, *Sana Na N'Hada*'s filmic narrative revolves around the binary opposing tradition and modernity that has been vastly explored in the context of African cinema, for example in

³¹ For one of the most lucid and exhaustive accounts on Guinea-Bissau, see "Anatomy of State Fragility: The Case of Guinea-Bissau" by Joshua B. Forrest (2010). For a detailed analysis of the drug trafficking situation in Guinea-Bissau and West Africa, see "The Evolving Drug Trade in Guinea-Bissau and West Africa" by Davin O'Regan (2014). For an incisive analysis on drug trafficking and the responses by civil society, particularly rappers, see "Les conséquences du narcotrafic sur un État fragile: le cas de la Guinée-Bissau" by Miguel de Barros, Patrícia Godinho Gomes and Domingo Correia (2013).

³² "Relatório da ONU diz que a Guiné-Bissau está a mercê do crime organizado" (2016).

³³ The concept of "cautionary pedagogy" is used by critic Stefan Sereda in describing "a common convention in African Cinema that cuts across the political ideologies of filmmakers" (196). He argues that African cinema has been used for educational and instructional purposes since its beginning (194).

Ousmane Sembene's *Emitai* (1971), mentioned earlier in the connection to Sana's film *Xime*.³⁴ In Sembene's paradigmatic *Emitai* a village in the region of Casamance, bordering Guinea-Bissau, must unite to confront the French colonial government, which, during World War II, forces the village to provide 50 tons of rice for the war effort, against the traditional custom of using excess rice for religious rituals. Even though traditional belief system and customs are ultimately insufficient in overcoming the cruelty and injustice of the colonial authorities as agents of Western modernity, collective mobilization, especially among women, in defiance of the colonial oppressor, is symbolically potent and politically empowering in and of itself. Sana's *Kadjike*, for its part, presents a diffuse globalized force that suddenly emerges in the remote Bijagó islands through urban middlemen who, in turn, entice and corrupt naïve or gullible members of the island community. Here, Sana asserts the ability of traditional society to overcome drug trafficking, even though as the case of Guinea-Bissau has demonstrated, only the concerted effort of the national and international communities, governmental and nongovernmental forces, can effectively deal with global drug trafficking. Yet, Sana prefers to offer *Kadjike* as an allegory of national unity through the plight of the Bijagó as a counterforce against the threat of malevolent forces. The film asserts the centrality of collective action as well as unity in purpose, identity, and preservation of the land's culture, values, and livelihood, in order to vanquish, or, at least, deter the perverted intrusion of global modernity in the form of drug trafficking. The Bijagós are vulnerable to forces that may overwhelm it, and Sana's film demands its defense and protection, but it argues that such efforts should emerge from the people themselves. By the same token, *Kadjike* offers a strong contemporary ecological message that is elicited in the film's title "Sacred Bush" and the profusion of extraordinary shots of the Bijagó natural landscape, where traditional spirituality and nature remain inextricably intertwined, thus complicating the binary between modernity and tradition.

³⁴I would like to thank Charlie Sugnet for his generosity and invaluable insights regarding the work of Ousmane Sembene within the context of African cinema and its resonance in the work of Sana Na N'Hada.



FILM CLIP KADJIKE

Through documentary and feature films *Sana Na H'Nada* has been making a pivotal contribution to the archive of Guinea-Bissau spanning the late colonial and early postcolonial periods,³⁵ by tracing the birth of the nation along with its hopes and achievements, as well as its challenges and travails. Sana's artistic vision and ethos, as well as that of Flora Gomes, have been influenced by their experiences as protagonists in the nation's liberation saga. For both Bissau-Guinean film directors, as well as for numerous founding figures in the history of African cinema—which coincided with the dawn of independence—film has not only been put at the service of nation-building, but has also been used to serve against all odds as a bastion of critical consciousness in postcolonial societies where individualized political and economic agendas have often superseded the national collective well-being, while mortgaging its future indefinitely.

³⁵ Other major filmic projects from or related to Guinea-Bissau include: the documentary *José Carlos Schwarz: A voz do povo* (José Carlos Schwarz: The People's Voice) (2006) by Abdulai Jamanca, focusing on the country's musical founding figure; the feature film *Clara di Sabura* (Clara, The Party Girl) (2011) by José Lopes, a cautionary tale of a young woman who is lured by the temptations of a leisurely life in a social context of material scarcity and struggle; the documentary *Bafatá Cine Clube* (2012) by San Tomean director Silas Tiny, focusing on the ruins of a movie theater and the memories of those who experienced it during colonial times in the interior city of Bafata; and the feature film *A batalha de Tabató* (The Battle of Tabató) (2013) by Portuguese director João Viana, a haunting allegory that brings together colonialism and postcolonialism, tradition and modernity, where music (particularly the *balafon* instrument of Mandinka roots) plays a pivotal mediating role. *O espinho da rosa* (The Thorn of the Rose) (2013), a debut feature by Bissau-Guinean director Filipe Henriques, is a daring thriller that focuses on pedophilia mixed with paranormal and fantastic elements set in Portugal with an African cast.

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Recebido em 22/02/2019

Aprovado em 25/03/2019

