When we go to a new film made by a director who has had a long career, we take considerable baggage with us. A first film or even a second film is one kind of experience; I can’t fix a number at which we change to another experience, but we don’t arrive at it gradually. Suddenly it comes about that a new picture by a familiar director is either a matter of continued eagerness or of newfound obligation—a feeling that it would be unfair not to see his or her latest work. In any case we take that director’s whole filmography with us to the movie theater, not necessarily in specifics but in state of mind. That is, we don’t see this latest offering quite as independently as we would a new director’s work: we are always comparing it, favorably or not, with its maker’s artistic past. Such was the case when I saw a film by a man “with a past”—followed, for a change of pace, by only the second film by a director from the same continent. Before treating the latter, I would like briefly to discuss the final picture by a distinguished predecessor of his.

Osmane Sembène (1923–2007) was one of the most important literary figures of sub-Saharan Africa at the same time as he was its premier filmmaker. Sembène came to the cinema by necessity: painfully aware that he could not reach the largely illiterate population of his native Senegal by means of a written art form, he studied film in Moscow with Sergei Gerasimov and Mark Donskoï from 1961 to 1962, then began to work in this (for him) new medium shortly thereafter.

Sembène’s films—among which *Black Girl* (1966) and *Xala* (1974) stand out—are not innovative in a technical sense; their artistic power and critical success stem from their compelling portraits of Third-World men and women struggling against forces, internal to their countries as well as external, which threaten their dignity if not their very existence. Sembène clearly saw his art as necessarily both socially functional or utilitarian and politically committed, but he was no mere propagandist—indeed, his cinematic *oeuvre* far transcends such narrow definition. Moreover, despite this filmmaker’s extensive contacts with the West, his movies are manifestly African in character, from the Wolof language that is spoken (by ninety percent of the Senegalese people) to the colorful textiles that are worn to the Muslim religion that is practiced (by eighty percent of Senegal’s citizens). Sembène could even be called a descendant of the traditional African *griot*, or storyteller, recording the history of his tribe or nation, criticizing its faults, and finding strength in its people in the face of the denigration of their society and culture inherent in all forms of colonialist imperialism.
Sembène’s 2000 film *Faat-Kine* (which was his first in eight years) showed his lighter side in its contemporary portrait of a single working mother as she navigates her way (together with her two children, two ex-husbands, and aged mother) through the delicate yet often funny maze of triumphs and troubles that comprise her life in the bustling Senegalese capital of Dakar. *Moolaadé* (2004), the last picture from this (at the time) octogenarian director, returns to Sembène’s soberly serious mode as we have seen it displayed in the past in such films as *Black Girl*, *Emitai* (1971), *Ceddo* (1977), and *Camp Thiaroye* (1988)—which themselves contrast with socially satirical pictures of his like *The Money Order* (1968) and *Xala*. The serious criticism in *Moolaadé*, however, is directed at the Senegalese in particular and the African people in general, not at the French, as it has often been aimed in Sembène’s work for the screen.

He himself wrote the screenplay, which is an attack on the practice of female genital mutilation that still goes on in Africa. The story is simple, necessarily so, as it is acted exclusively by non-professionals—on whom Sembène has long relied out of both necessity and a belief in the collective heroism of the masses. The heroine here is one middle-aged woman named Collé, who, in her particular African village and in defiance of Islamic patriarchy, stands out against the mutilation practice. She does so by invoking *moolaadé* ("magical protection"), a custom of sanctuary that enables her to shelter frightened girls who run to her for protection. The sacerdotal corps of women who perform the mutilating, the Salindana, then threatens her, as do some of the men who refuse to marry girls who were not, in their description, “purified” (and thereby not only deprived of sexual pleasure, but also given pain in its place) when they were young.

But the men are forsaking these girls—the source of the village’s real strength—for a religious custom that cements their own hegemony. For, in granting the girls asylum, Collé is spiritually restoring the village’s wholeness as well as literally preserving its source of life and hence ensuring its continuation, since girls whose genitals are mutilated have difficult births or are simply unable to bear children, even as many of them die from infection and loss of blood. Indeed, during the struggle between Collé and the rest of the village that forms the nexus of *Moolaadé*, one young girl does die of the mutilation. Collé, who has been holding her ground, now holds it all the more, and thereafter the rebellion against this barbaric practice begins to gain support . . . in one African village, in any event.

The starkness of these villagers’ lives, and of this narrative, is emphasized by the patterned, even forcefully symmetrical, manner in which Sembène has moved his camera and his people. And the cinematography, by Dominique Gentil, makes clear that color is a relevant factor in what is otherwise a stark existence—so much so that some of the mud structures we see are painted pink. As is his wont, Sembène even provides comic perspective on the *gravitas* of *Moolaadé*’s dramatic premise through the simpleminded response of the men to female radicalization: they blame the radio, with its disruptive reports from the outside world, and provoke the women’s laughter as they go about collecting and building a pyre for all the radios in the village.