RETHINKING REPRESENTATIONS OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICAN CINEMAS

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of identities that are specific to Francophone West Africa, as depicted in the films produced in the region since the 1990s. The films are set in the countries of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, among the ethnic groups that form the diverse demographic landscape of the region, and they portray stories and characters that strongly relate these films to the local ways of belonging. While existing research in the field of African film studies focuses on how films from Francophone West Africa portray postcolonial or national identities, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the depiction of identities that are linked to the region’s ethnic cultures. This thesis demonstrates that the local ways of belonging and the practices, rituals and beliefs which these identities rely on continue to have vital significance for representation in Francophone West African cinemas. Using textual analysis as a base for its arguments, this thesis is underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines extensive contextual research into various West African practices, rituals and beliefs with the philosophical works on cinema by Gilles Deleuze. A number of the concepts Deleuze defines help significantly in the understanding of time and identity in the films, and the interpretative nature of Deleuze’s work offers the opportunity to bridge the gap in film theory application in studies of Francophone African cinema. By applying this diverse theoretical approach to its investigation of the intertwining local identities, the thesis highlights the necessity of an intersectional approach to analysing identity representation in Francophone African cinemas. It is the first study of representations of ethnically-linked identities in the field of African film studies.
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Introduction

*Rethinking Representations of Identity in Contemporary Francophone West African Cinemas*

In an interview that is a part of the press pack for the UK cinematic release of *Timbuktu* (2015), Abderrahmane Sissako recounts the issues he and his team encountered while filming on location in Mali. Sissako shares his concerns about safety in Timbuktu, which ultimately led to the relocation of the shoot to Mauritania, but he mentions something else that preoccupied him at the time. ‘The main difficulty,’ the director says,

was how to bring over the various ethnic groups that were in Timbuktu such as Songhais, Tuaregs, Bambaras and Fulani....

(Watershed 2015)

He then continues to talk about the dangers of making the film on location, before emphasizing again the crucial role of ethnic identities and language in his casting decisions for the film. In the context of the whole interview, this is a fairly brief mention of the topic of ethnic identities but it nevertheless draws attention to the significance of representing identities linked with the spatio-temporal milieu of the film.

Identity and its representation are contested topics in film and cultural studies. Stuart Hall observes that the discourse around identity in late-modernity emphasizes a perceived shift, or fracturing, that results in identities ‘formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us’ (2012: 598). Hall’s conception of identity sees it as evolving and dependent on the situation in which a subject finds themselves. What he suggests is that identities transform and are transformed by the cultural systems around them and cinema is one such area where identities are
represented and able to affect the identities of its spectators. Hall then continues by stating that ‘identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation’ (2012: 4). In other words, identities cannot exist without representation as representation is what fuels the creation and evolution of identities.

However, Hall also implies that identity is fragmented, composed of different layers and elements that intertwine (2012: 4). In the context of this thesis, Hall’s claim regarding the intertwining of identities implies that focusing simply on representations of ethnic identity would paint a skewed picture of its significance in Francophone West African cinemas. Instead, the thesis investigates representations of other forms of identity as well, including societal status, gender and spirituality/religion, which inevitably affect and are affected by ethnic identity (Nagel 1994: 152). National identity, however, does not have a dedicated chapter, because in the films surveyed in the thesis, nationality does not seem to feature in a notable way. Still, this is not to say that national identities do not exist in West Africa: Miles and Rochefort prove that some sections of society certainly feel an attachment to their nationality (1991: 393). Rather, the omission of national identity aims to illustrate the possibility and necessity to view Francophone West African cinemas as representing ways of belonging other than those outlined in previous research in African film studies. The form of belonging that particularly motivates the research in this thesis is ethnic identity.

i.i On ethnic identity

In Francophone West Africa, ethnic identities can both motivate and inform the practice of filmmakers in the region. For instance, Serer filmmaker Safi Faye from Senegal admits her education as an ethnologist inspires and frames her career and films (Ukadike 2002: 30-1). Cheick Oumar Sissoko, a Bambara director born in Mali, claims his ethnic cultural heritage informs his artistic expression (Ukadike 2002: 182). Based on some of the filmmakers’ comments about ethnic identity in Francophone West Africa, it is far from a negligible element in their films. Furthermore, ethnic identity in French West Africa influences other aspects of
people’s identities, including their societal status, the way they understand gender, and their spiritual and religious affiliations. Ethnic identity strongly affects the way people in this region think of themselves and their place in the society and therefore it must be assumed that ethnic identity also informs the cinematic representations of and by the individuals from this region.

However, ethnicity tends to be overshadowed in the field of film studies by other sociological concepts such as race and nationality. The reasons for this are manifold, including the use of ethnicity interchangeably with race, which also leads to assumptions that ethnicity applies only to non-white people (Friedman 1991: 2) even though Stuart Hall rightly proclaimed that ‘we are all ethnically located’ (1988: 29). Ethnicity can also be understood in terms of the exilic/diasporic Other within an ethnic majority (Naficy 2001), or it is deemed to be of a lesser significance in the context of European nations and cinemas, where ethnic majority is considered a nation. More specifically, in the research on Francophone West African cinemas, discussions about identity are more likely to revolve around nationality or postcolonial identity than ethnicity. This is a reflection of the historical evolution of French West African cinemas, since their beginnings correspond with the region’s countries gaining independence from France in the course of the 1960s. The era marks a distinctly political nature of the films coming out of the region, with filmmakers negotiating the meaning of their newly emergent national identity (Thackway 2006: 8). As the newness of national identity wore off, and the trend in Western academia moved towards the exploration of postcolonialism, the analyses of French West African films aimed their focus at investigations of postcolonial identities. When ethnic identity happens to be mentioned, it is mostly incidental and never leading to a more in-depth inspection of its significance (Downing 1996: 216). This has been the case until now.

This thesis proposes to bridge the gap in knowledge about the representations of ethnic identities in Francophone West Africa by analysing a number of films that came out of three selected countries in this region since the 1990s. The analysis will identify how have ethnic identities have been represented on screen, as well as
establish how ethnic identities manifest in representations of other forms of identity, such as social status, gender, and spirituality/religion. In order to be able to recognize representations of ethnic and other identities, each of the chapters will contain an overview of research combining resources from the fields of anthropology, ethnography, political science and cultural studies. This is designed to supplement the research about ethnicity in film studies, which is distinctly oriented at ethnic identity representation outside the African continent.

Prior to the analysis of ethnic identity representation in the first chapter, however, the section that follows will establish the parameters of this thesis and survey the research that already exists on the topic of Francophone West African cinemas. This section will provide an introduction to the West African ethnic groups referred to in the thesis, as well as a general overview of their social hierarchies. The next section will consider the historical and ongoing connections between Francophone West Africa and Europe, before outlining how these connections led to the establishing of Francophone West African cinemas. Finally, the review engages with theoretical frameworks most often used in the analysis of West African cinema.

i.ii Defining contemporary Francophone West Africa

West Africa is a region of the African continent, geographically broadly defined as the area between Senegambia in the west and Lake Chad in the east, including the sub-Saharan part of Mali and a range of countries on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Consequently, this territory is exceptionally diverse in its ethnic composition (Central Intelligence Agency 2014, see Figure 1) and history, so any discussions of the region in terms of absolute state borders ought to be undertaken cautiously.

The thesis focuses on films from countries within what is generally described as Francophone West Africa. Yet, as the central aim of this project is to draw attention to the role of ethnic rather than national identities in these films, it is crucial to point out that ‘Francophone West Africa’ is a contested term to say the least. This is not only due to the fact that the French language is present in just 3
out of 10 films in this thesis. Some of the ethnic groups included in this thesis, for instance the Serer, occupy lands not only across nations but across former colonial territories too (Mwakikagile 2010: 137) without this having much documented impact on the integrity of said ethnic group (Mwakikagile 2010: 145). The usefulness of ‘Francophone West Africa’ in terms of cultural significance is therefore rather diminished in this thesis, though it will be retained on the basis of its continued geographical and political meaning.

The parameters of this thesis are set up to cover cinematic productions from three countries in Francophone West Africa, released since the 1990s: Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. They have been selected due to their history and ethnic group composition. Before they were separated into distinct countries during the French colonial era, they shared their pre-colonial history as parts of various West African empires. This shared history means that the countries are also cross-populated by ethnic groups with similar or common cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with the
largest ethno-linguistic group being the Mande peoples. Since the Mande people are the largest group in the region, they occupy a central position in the thesis but this project also incorporates other ethnic groups (Wolof, Serer, Lebou, Mossi) that have been represented in the films used in this thesis. By using these demographic parameters, the research aims to demonstrate the continued significance of ethnicity in Francophone West Africa and explore how the region’s ethnic identities are represented in film.

Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso have each, since their independence from France in the 1960s, established specific relationships between themselves and the ethnic groups residing across the region. In Senegal, the narrative of national identity had initially been strongly affected by ‘father of the nation’ Léopold Sédar Senghor’s\textsuperscript{1} philosophy of négritude. The négritude theory emphasizes a shared identity among people of African descent, while also maintaining that there is a cultural affinity between Africans and Europeans. This ties in well with Senghor’s willingness to cooperate closely with France, and with the fact that French has remains one of the only two official languages\textsuperscript{2} in Senegal (in addition to Wolof). As an approach to national identity, négritude became a stabilizing narrative agent in Senegal, where the ethnic majority (Wolof) is complemented by a number of minority ethnic groups. Since the 1980s, the people of Senegal have been reconsidering Senghor’s legacy, but as Jean-François Havard writes, the ideology of cultural pan-Africanism remains strong in Senegal today (2013: 76).

Despite the fact that Mali has a demographic outline similar to Senegal (one majority ethnic group, the Mande peoples, and a number of minority ethnic groups, including the Tuareg), there has historically been less political and social unity within the Malian nation. James R. McGuire writes that there is a

\textsuperscript{1} First president of independent Senegal, serving between 1960-1980.

\textsuperscript{2} David Murphy points out that though most Senegalese ‘national’ literature is written in French, only a minority of the Snegalese population understands the language (2008:49).
dialogical and openended relationship between Old Mali 
(and the Mande as it exists today as a cultural area) and the 
modern state of Mali. (1993: 38)

McGuire suggests that not only is Malian nationality tightly linked to the Mande 
etnic group, he emphasizes that the relationship is complex and not always in agreement. Furthermore, the statement shows that other ethnic groups residing within Malian state boundaries are somewhat ill-served by this relationship. This is evidenced, for example, in the 2012 conflict in the north of Mali, where Tuareg rebels have taken over what they perceive as their land and declared an independent Tuareg state called Azawad (Polgreen and Cowell 2012).

In Burkina Faso, the demographic composition of the state mirrors that in Senegal and Mali, with the Mossi people as the majority ethnic group. In this country, the decentralisation drive has led to the strengthening of ethnic group chieftancies and other community groups (Hagberg 2004: 51). However, rather than creating a social rift or a competition for power among the burkinabé ethnic groups, decentralization has in fact enabled a new alliance between chiefs and urban elites (Gervais and Mandé 2000: 78). This spurred on an ongoing creation of burkinabé national identity, rooted in the cooperation among the ethnic groups.

With regards to the time period of cinematic production that this project considers, there are two reasons behind the decision to limit the project’s scope to films released since the 1990s. Firstly, the end of the 1980s saw the fall of the Soviet Union and with it formally ceased the global tensions between the toppled regime and the USA. The Cold War and its end had a great economic and political impact on the nations in Africa, ushering in a new era of both economic austerity and a drive towards democratization. The dictatorial regimes funded by ‘playing off Washington and Moscow against each other’ (Perlez 1992) were put under increasing pressure to democratize or be taken out of power in a coup d’etat. Such was the case in Mali, where mass anti-government protests ousted the oppressive regime of Moussa Traoré, or in Senegal, where the government of Abdou Diouf slowly introduced
democratic reforms. In Burkina Faso, on the other hand, some democratizing measures occurred at the time but the dictatorship of Blaise Compaoré continued until 2014. Nevertheless, the beginning of the 1990s signalled a new era of economic stability for these West African countries as well as the West African filmmakers affected by these changes.3

The other factor that affected the selection of film resources for this project was the general difficulty or lack of access to film material from Francophone West Africa in the UK. With the exception of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and the archive of the Africa in Motion film festival in Glasgow, access to Francophone West African titles is very limited. This has invariably affected the choice of films in this project but it also opens up questions about how Francophone West African films are curated for global audiences, as well as why these films which were often shot on celluloid are not being digitally preserved and restored.4

Having set up the temporal and spatial parameters of the thesis, this overview will now proceed to outline the scope of the project in terms of ethnicity. The next section introduces the West African ethnic groups that are covered in the thesis, paying a particular attention to the Mande peoples, who will be dominating the discussion of ethnic identity in the first chapter.

i.iii West African ethnic groups: Mande peoples

West Africa has a number of ethnic groups which can be broadly defined as categories of people that share common ancestors, culture and social experiences. Although West Africa is generally defined in terms of countries and nationalities, the reality is that West Africans prefer to see themselves as members of ethnic groups rather than nations (Kuper 1965: 134-135). This is partly due to the fact that the region was divided into countries relatively late in its history and this division that happened during the ‘Scramble for Africa’ conference in Berlin in 1884-5 did

3 In Mali, Cheick Oumar Sissoko was inspired by the fall of the Traoré regime to make Guimba the Tyrant.
4 See Bisschoff and Murphy (2014).
not take into account the ethnic geography of the area at all (Craven 2015: 31-2). The ethnic landscape of West Africa consists of several major groups (Mande, Serer, Wolof, Mossi, Lebou, Tuareg, etc.) and thousands of smaller groups and sub-groups, with each group sharing a common language or dialect and culture. There are no clear-cut borders between the groups and more groups can occupy the same land.

The Mande people are one of the most prominent ethnic groups of West Africa, and they will be the central point of the discussion about representation of ethnic identity in chapter one. The first two films analysed in this thesis are set among characters of Mande origin, allowing an in-depth case study of the representations of a specific ethnic identity in Francophone West African cinemas. The Mande peoples reside in the vast area between Senegambia, southern Mali, Guinea, and northern Nigeria (Hale 1998: 11-12). Similarly to other groups in West Africa, the Mande people trace their tribal origins to the Middle Ages (Conrad 2006: 76), particularly to the era of the Mali Empire. This was a period when Mande people had economic and political power over most of West Africa and the life of the founder of the empire, King Sundjata Keita, is a crucial point of reference for keepers of the Mande traditions. These keepers, also called griots, jeliw, or guewel depending on the tribe, are bards and storytellers who make sure the sense of shared history expressed through their epic tales is passed onto the next generations (Conrad 2006: 75). The griots use metaphors and dialogue (Conrad 2006: 78) in their stories and are often accompanied by a traditional musical instrument such as a kora (string instrument) or a djembe drum, which is why they are a popular form of entertainment on virtually any occasion in the village life. Furthermore, griots often have a patron and in addition to singing their patron’s praise during events, they also perform the role of an advisor in social and political matters, since they possess a deep understanding of the tribe’s traditions and history (Conrad 2006: 79-80). For a small payment, however, they can sing in praise of anyone and often do so at large events. Since they are an essential part of many West African ethnic groups, griots appear frequently in contemporary West African cinema and their storytelling is often used as a framing device for film narrative.
Other important elements of Mande ethnic identity, such as kinship identity, appear to be a theme in Francophone West African films. Kinship identity will therefore drive the analysis in chapter two, since it transgresses the boundaries of Mande ethnic identity and enables discussion of films set among ethnic groups other than the Mande. Before the artificial division into states by European colonial powers, people of West Africa have long been grouping themselves according to their “blood, matrimonial or fictive relations within a family, household, lineage or even an ethnic group” (Rashid 2006: 119). These kinships formed a person’s social identity and determined their political alliances, family inheritance and status in the society (Rashid, 2006: 119). In addition to this identity, a person could join a secret society based on several criteria such as age, profession, or wealth, and attain a broader social identity as well as a communal solidarity outside his/her kinship group (Rashid 2006: 119).

Generally in West African ethnic groups, the relationships both within and outside a kinship group are dictated by genealogy, descent pattern, and gender. The oldest members of any group are regarded with the most authority and are able to make important decisions regarding the group’s economical, social, and religious activities (Rashid 2006: 119). Notably, different ethnic groups follow different forms of inheritance, with Mande, Yoruba, and Fulbe people being patrilineal and Serer, Wolof, and Tuareg emphasizing matrilineage (Rashid 2006: 119). Regardless of their gender, however, oldest members of the society always earn the highest respect. The ways in which this hierarchy affects cinematic representations of gender identity and African feminisms will be considered in chapter three.

In addition to kinship, West African societies also function in terms of a caste system. The expression ‘caste system’ should be applied with caution because it is very dissimilar to the Hindu caste system which is well-known for its rigidity (Rashid 2006: 123). As social scientist Tal Tamari (1991: 223) says, rather than endogamous social stratification, the West African caste system groups together professionals in traditional crafts (leatherworkers, potters, etc.) within their ethnic groups of either
Wollof, Mande or Fulbe. The three castes are as follows: the nobles at the top (rulers, farmers, pastoralists), the craftsmen in the middle (referred to as the *nyamakalaw*) and slaves at the bottom (Rashid 2006: 122). Scholars point out, however, that this system has always been flexible and open to outside influences and so various crafts have been transmitted into the system and there has been much cultural exchange between ethnic groups (Rashid 2006: 122). In other words, the West African caste system welcomes individual agency and does not overly determine its members’ futures. This fact will be considered and applied to the analysis of the first film in chapter two. Historians David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (1995: 7-10) conclude that any studies that use the caste system as a strict categorisation in West African ethnic groups should be regarded with caution, since the distorting categorisation of caste and class has been mostly applied by the French colonialists to further their imperial causes. According to Conrad and Frank, the French believed that if they understood the social systems among West African ethnic groups, it would be easier to control them and gain cooperation from members of the elite categories.

*Griots* are, in fact, members of a caste along with blacksmiths and leatherworkers because their profession is seen as a crafting of words (Conrad 2006: 76). These craftsmen belong to the second lowest caste in the traditional Mande caste system, superior only to slaves and servants. In spite of the honourable role they have in the Mande society, *griots* are generally regarded with suspicion. It is not known precisely why West Africans treat their *griots* in a hostile manner but Conrad and Frank suggest that these occupants of the *nyamakalaw* caste were thought to have immense magical powers because they could manipulate metal and words and were therefore feared by the other caste people (1995: 4-5). The fact that *griots* are so often featured in films from this region thus speaks about their continued significance among West African ethnic groups as well as about their impact on the cultural history of West Africa.

It must be noted here that with the arrival of European colonialism, these pre-existing power arrangements became an advantage for the Europeans during their
establishment in West Africa (Rashid 2006: 137). By imposing the colonial system, the settlers soon overpowered the complex systems of caste, kinship, and enslavement and forced West Africa to join the Atlantic economic system. According to Rashid, this meant that West Africans were tied into large-scale production which ignited vast social and cultural changes across the whole continent and tightly secured West Africa in the capitalist system. Gradually, new conditions of prosperity as well as poverty were created and external markets became available for trade. The caste system was banned by European administrations in the 1930s but many West Africans found ways around the European laws (Rashid 2006: 138). Chapter two will engage in a further discussion about the ways caste and kinship can still influence societal status in the films coming out of Francophone West Africa. The impact of European colonialism in Africa reaches beyond caste system, however, encompassing areas like the economy, culture, language and religion, as outlined briefly in the following section.

i.iv West Africa and Europe

Like the rest of the continent, West Africa fell under European colonial rule in the 19th century and was later partitioned into sovereign countries. 5 France laid claims to the majority of the region, closely followed by the British Empire which appropriated Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. The German Empire claimed Togo, and Portugal occupied Guinea (Ward, Prothero and Leathes 1912). The only place untouched by the European colonial project in West Africa was the Republic of Liberia, officially owned by former liberated African-American slaves.

As opposed to Britain’s mostly commercial colonial endeavour, the French colonial project in West Africa was a mission civilisatrice, intended to promote moral and social evolution to the colonial sujets (Conklin 1997: 1). This was to be done by eradicating ‘barbaric’ languages and customary law and replacing them with French language and values (Conklin 1997: 6). However, the French attempts to expand their colonial empire met with strong resistance from West African

5 Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali
ethnic groups (Ranger 1990: 55) and the diversity of cultural, political, and ideological organization made it difficult for the French to comprehend how the region functioned. With the use of their superior fire power, the French secured most of what later became their colony by the early twentieth century. Despite the fact that France was purportedly operating a civilizing mission in West Africa, very little improved for the indigenous people in French African colonies, and all of the benefits from the increased trade in raw materials were gained by the French settlers. In the First World War, as many as one million African men (Crowder 1990: 283) were mobilized and active on the ground in both Africa and Europe but they were never considered equal to the French troops. In the Second World War, the blatant racism of European armies helped to escalate the Thiaroye Massacre in Senegal in 1944, when French soldiers opened fire on unarmed African soldiers demanding improvement of their conditions (Haque 2013). The massacre spurred the independence movement in many parts of West Africa, which were already exhausted by the forced labour, shortage of resources and wage freezes caused by the ‘War effort’ (Suret-Canale and Boahen 1993: 162).

In the 1960s, France and Britain withdrew from all of their possessions in West Africa but both countries continued to maintain ties with their former colonies (Birmingham 1995: 7). France was especially interested in establishing an international Francophone community in West Africa with strong involvement of the French government (Birmingham 1995: 6). The French presence was not manifest purely in politics; the colonial heritage penetrated West Africa on social, cultural, as well as psychological levels (Birmingham 1995: 6) through the continuing influence of the French language, Catholicism/Christianity, and imported French cultural produce. The French language in particular, Guy Martin notes (1995: 5), remains a tool for the implementation of French values, French culture, and education. This thesis, however, sets out to challenge the implication that

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6 Portugal recognized the independence of today’s Guinea-Bissau, its only colony in West Africa, in 1974.
7 For instance, French newsreels and documentaries in cinemas and on television (Andrade-Watkins 1996: 112).
French language and culture have irreversibly changed West African identities. By considering the representations of identities in cinema, in acknowledgement of Hall’s conception of identity and representation, this project aims to question the ways French culture and language are assumed to influence the West African cinematic landscape. This is not to say that the French language and culture are completely absent in the films in this thesis; that would be an unjust oversimplification. The aim here is to demonstrate that local ways of belonging, such as ethnic identity, are still being represented in Francophone West African cinemas, and therefore these identities should be considered in any academic debate in this field. In order to better illustrate the contribution this project can bring to the research in Francophone African cinemas, the following section will summarize the current state of the field.

i.v Francophone West African cinemas

Cinema as an art form was introduced in Francophone West Africa during the first half of the 20th century (Diawara 1998: 209) by the French regime and strictly European film material was screened. Apart from being used as a location, however, West Africa and its inhabitants were mainly absent from representations in the early French films set on the continent. In particular, the films made during and between the World Wars portrayed white French citizens as heroic figures and black Africans as secondary characters or villains (Sherzer 1996: 4-5). Françoise Pfaff notes that it is generally agreed that cinema actually made by Africans began during the period of decolonisation in the 1960s, undoubtedly linked to the questioning of identities and rejection of the dominant colonial imagery at the time (1988: x), which is why Barlet suggests cinema is a tool for revolution (2000: 34) in the African context.

Although the majority of West African filmmakers were then united in their motivation to portray the realities of daily life in Africa (Barlet 2000: 34), the question remained: what makes cinema authentically African in style and narrative?

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8 The first West African film, Afrique sur Seine (1955) by the Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, was a short film about the African immigrants’ experience of Paris.
(Diawara 1998: 210; Pfaff 1998: x; Haynes 1999: 26) After all, cinema is a Western invention and many West African directors have studied at French or Russian film schools (Jørholt 2001: 96), where they would have been taught to use European filmmaking conventions. Yet, some academics are convinced there is a way to link Francophone West African cinematic expression to its distinct place of origin. For example, anthropologist and film scholar Lieve Spaas writes that even though the concept of self-reflection through cinema is fundamentally a French idea, West African filmmakers have been able to reclaim their cinematic identity from the French by making films in their native languages and using the distinctive pattern of a griot’s storytelling in film narrative (2000: 3).

Both African and European cineastes debated whether African or even West African film language itself exists, especially after Africans had been exposed to the confines of filmmaking of popular American and French cinema (Cottenet-Hage 1996: 175; Haynes 1999: 27). As Stephen A. Zacks (1999: 9) points out, such an argument can be taken to the extreme, and any film that does not demonstrate sufficient ‘revolutionary’ characteristics can be accused of inauthenticity. The need for any African film to be revolutionary appears to be the wishful thinking of theorists seeking an antithesis to mainstream cinema. In fact, this argument goes back to the independence era, explains Kamal Salhi, when

African identities come to be wholly articulated as a result of the negation of western imperatives and their replacement by the acquisition of a language and a voice that cannot be imitated because they are, in some sense, authentically Africa’s own. (2011: 299)

Zacks’ point is taken on and illustrated by David Murphy (2000: 244) who finds influences of Western cinematography in Djibril Diop Mambety’s Touki-Bouki (1973) and Ousmane Sembéne’s Xala (1975), and claims that ‘there is no “authentic Africa”, nor is there an “authentic” West’ (2000: 240). The use of Western cinematic language in West African films, however, is not simply a matter of the impact of popular culture. According to Salhi, by referring to ‘wider international aesthetic
practices, Francophone postcolonial cinema (...) both asserts and problematizes the boundaries between nation and other’ (2011: 297). In doing so, it facilitates how contemporary Francophone West African filmmakers probe the issue of globalisation (2011: 299), whether it is a direct criticism of Western cinematic language like in Abderrahmane Sissako’s Bamako (2006) or its utilization to illustrate a specific West African issue, such as in Moussa Touré’s La Pirogue (2012).

Nevertheless, scholars have established certain characteristics of style that recur in Francophone West African films. Pfaff summarizes the preference of Francophone West African filmmakers for slow-paced linear narratives and allegorical style (1988: x), which she attributes to the filmmakers’ inspiration in traditional tales and legends by griots. Manthia Diawara adds that shot/reverse shots, close-ups, and fast camera movements have no place in an African film (1998: 215). John D. H. Downing is considerably less didactic in his description of Francophone West African film style; he posits that styles and influences range from neorealism to avant-garde and filmmakers gain inspiration from world cinema as well as West African traditions (1996: 190).

The importance of African traditions and particularly the oral tradition of the griot storyteller is a point most academics tend to agree on, and Diawara has argued that an African filmmaker constitutes the personification of a griot (1998: 215). To what extent his proclamation is true can be challenged, since it is based on just two West African filmmakers in his article. Yet, Tomaselli, Shepperson and Eke adopt the idea of West African filmmakers as griots uncritically and stylize them into the role of diasporic guardians of West African culture (1995: 23-24). Again, it is debatable whether such claims are sound. Melissa Thackway (2006: 57-58) clarifies that the adoption of the term griot by both filmmakers and scholars alike is due to the manifestations of oral tradition in West African film style and narrative. She also

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9 Diawara does not specify a West African film style.
10 The only West African film director who is by patrilineage a true member of the griot profession is Dani Kouyaté.
writes that griots engage in social criticism and freedom of speech, both activities to which modern West African filmmakers aspire.

Greater consensus occurs among scholars in discussions of common themes in West African cinema. Pfaff lists the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, immigration, abuse of power, and condition of women among others (1988: x). Film scholar Rod Stoneman takes a step further and divides the themes into three categories (albeit admitting they are rather reductive):

a) Village Films – films focusing on the pre-colonial era

b) Modern Social Films – marked by an engaged criticism of urbanisation

c) Magic Realist Films – formally experimental, with magical elements linked to a specific African culture or religion. (1993: 178)

While it certainly illuminates understanding of some films, Stoneman’s categorisation soon reaches its limits when applied to more recent films, which often do not belong to any of the three groups or fit into all. In contrast, Salhi condenses African film into an exploration of how “suppressed internal others of the nation (...) can find a voice” (2011: 297). The aforementioned scholars, however, seem to be in agreement over the general focus on social problems in African cinema, prompting the Congolese film director Mweze Ngangura to ask whether the purpose of African cinema can be purely entertainment, instead of a fight against a current crisis, such as corruption or disease (1996: 60-62). He illustrates his point by saying that films ‘with a message’ can be misinterpreted by their often elite and/or European audience and that they may appear removed from normal African cinema-goers by being too didactic and not an entertaining spectacle. In short, Ngangura calls for an African cinema intended for African audiences; a cinema which includes popular genres like comedy or horror (1996: 62; Murphy 2000: 240). Even though the African film industry has developed and produced many comedies since Ngangura’s criticism in 1996, his point is still

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11 For example, Timbuktu (2014) by Abderrahmane Sissako or Moolaadé (2004) by Ousmane Sembène.
relevant in 2018 when few of the West African filmmakers receiving European coverage produce popular genre films.\textsuperscript{12} This is clearly a question of funding and European stereotyping of African film production.

Issues of production and distribution are a significant topic in the field of Francophone West African cinemas. On one side is the cinema audience who, due to the diversity in its mother tongues, consumes mainly American or Nigerian films (Sama 1996: 153) and on the other side is the filmmaker struggling to secure sufficient funds for their project. The small number of cinemas left over from the colonial period in West Africa are mostly in a state of disrepair (Sama 1996: 153) and have no means to compete with the modern cinema buildings owned by major American film distribution companies and the range of films they are able to put on. According to James Genova, the struggle to establish independent cinema venues in Africa ‘exposes the structural inequalities in the global economy that constrained the prospects for economic growth in postcolonial Africa’ (2013: 8). As the head of one of Africa’s distribution companies confirms, there are not nearly enough African films to cover the audience’s appetite (Sama 1996: 154), in most part because filmmakers are only able to raise funds to make one or two films per decade (Downing 1996: 191-2).

Due to its close relationships with its former colonies, France is undeniably active in the financing of Francophone West African filmmakers. There are several governmental organizations (Ministère de la Coopération, Centre National de la Cinématographie) and more recently also television channels (Canal Plus) that invest into African filmmaking (Downing 1996: 192), often in return for control over the film production and distribution in Europe (Downing 1996: 192). Unfortunately, this also means that only a narrow selection of film directors get French or European funding and they often make films thought to fit well into the film festival circuit genres. Lately, West African filmmakers have gained the option to apply for

\textsuperscript{12} There are elements of comedy in Abderrahmane Sissako’s and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun’s latest films but they cannot substantiate being labelled as comedies.
funding by their own government; however, there are usually political caveats and censorship threats linked to this source of money (Downing 1996: 193).

Following this survey of the central issues in Francophone West African cinemas will be an overview of the theoretical frameworks commonly used in the analysis of films from this region. The section below intends to show the advantages and disadvantages of applying these frameworks, before introducing the specific theoretical structure implemented in this thesis.

i.vi Francophone West African cinemas and Film Theory

Over the years since the 1960s era of decolonisation in Africa, the cinema of West Africa has been analysed through three major theoretical frameworks: Postcolonialism, Third Cinema and Transnationalism.

According to Murphy, postcolonialism links cultures that have been subjected to colonial oppression and explores their rebellion against their exploitation (2000: 248). In other words, for postcolonial theorists, the ethnic and cultural differences of places as distant as West Africa and East Asia can have less impact on the regions’ cultural produce than the shared experience of being colonised by European empires. It may seem that postcolonial theory is removed from the regional specifics that are usually thought of as having great significance in a filmmaker’s work. However, Gloria Onyeoziri clarifies that postcolonial readings of African cinema do not simply address issues in a historicizing manner without accounting for the aspirations of Africans, neither is the postcolonial theory blind to the influence of other local forms of expression (2011: 382). By using colonialism as an anchoring argument in the interpretation of West African cinema, postcolonial scholars revive Frantz Fanon’s famous psychoanalytic diagnosis of African people in Black Skins, White Masks (1952), who according to him were paralyzed by their split colonial identity and feelings of inferiority in the face of the Westernized world. In order to rehabilitate themselves from the past, the pioneers of postcolonial Francophone West African filmmaking, such as Djibril Diop Mambéty, Souleymane Cissé, Ousmane Sembène and Med Hondo, made films that challenged the colonial
view of Africa and strove to raise the profile of the continent and its people (Salhi 2011: 299). Dina Sherzer concurs and adds that these films engage with both present and the past in that they focus on what everyday life is like for the descendants of colonised Africans (1996: 11).

Yet, there are many critics of the use of postcolonial theory in the analysis of African cinema. In his latest book titled Trash: African Cinema From Below (2013), Kenneth W. Harrow sidesteps postcolonial theory and argues that contemporary African cinema is best understood in terms of the impact of capitalism and material culture. He claims that African cinema uses counter-aesthetics of garbage and hunger to make a statement against the perfectionist capitalist Western society (Harrow 2013: 1-6). However, Ella Shohat takes a less radical approach and calls for a reconsideration of the extent of issues which postcolonial framework can reliably cover (1992: 111 -112). Admitting that the postcolonial theory can only explain a certain part of contemporary global relations, Shohat proposes that a flexible relationship between numerous theories would be more suited to the complex issues involved in postcolonial analysis. Finally, Arif Dirlik criticises postcolonial theorists for focusing all their efforts into the past while ignoring more recent forms and consequences of economic and cultural hegemony (1994: 331). He points out that by failing to contextualize postcolonial theory on a global level, postcolonial scholars only see the victims of the colonial system as suffering from the colonial past.

Third Cinema theory shares some characteristics with the postcolonial theory, in that it brings together cinemas of nations from across the globe under one unifying theory. Furthermore, the continuing effects of colonisation also play a major role in Third Cinema theory; however, the major driving force behind this theory is the inequality between the ‘Third world’ and the ‘First’ and ‘Second worlds’. Advocates of this theory place emphasis on terms like difference and authenticity:

13 In this context, the 'Third world' is taken to describe the colonised world, while the 'First world' defines European colonial empires. The 'Second world' can then be broadly understood as the developing countries of the former Soviet bloc.
from their point of view, cinema that originates in the ‘Third world’ ought to use style and narrative in a way that distances it from the style of popular narrative cinema. Arguably, by telling stories without a hint of Western influence, the cinema of the ‘Third world’ is considered authentic. According to Teshome Gabriel, the most prominent Third Cinema theorist, Third Cinema is a different and therefore a subversive version of cinema that aims to liberate itself from the domination of Western forms of cinema (Zacks 1999: 7). In his criticism of Gabriel, Zacks picks up on the militancy of Gabriel’s arguments and describes his approach as explicit and neo-Marxist (1999: 7). Indeed, the Third Cinema theory has a strong left-wing political agenda and in its focus on ending the oppression of the West, it is more suited to the analysis of early West African cinema of 1960s, when filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembéne engaged in full-scale criticism of the colonial regime. 

Jonathan Haynes supports Zacks’ criticism and comments that those who become critics in the field of African film are often led to this theory by their political opinions, and their nostalgia for the liberationist project in Africa may be preventing them from seeing the nuances of African cinemas (1999: 23). This does not mean West African cinema is not politically engaged, however it must be acknowledged that the films are as much about personal stories as they are about a changing society.

In Paul Willemen’s view, Third Cinema is a cinema of lucidity without a specific aesthetic form and, most importantly, with comments on issues that ‘First’ and ‘Second Cinemas’ do not discuss (Pines and Willemen 1990: 13). In the words of Anthony Guneratne, a film historian, Willemen appreciates the fact that unlike other counter-cinemas, Third Cinema does not indulge in stylistic innovation to prove its distance from Hollywood, and therefore remains legible to its audiences (2003: 14). Yet, Haynes points out again that this is very much in line with the 1960s style of socialist propaganda and that these aims cannot be effective in a region where cinemagoers have scarce access to local film production facilities (1999: 24). One could argue that both Willemen and Gabriel refuse to acknowledge that African nations are structures created by Western colonial powers and that West
African social stratification works on the basis of West African traditions rather than Western class systems. In other words, the Third Cinema theory is a useful framework in the analysis of the representations of neo-colonial structures in Francophone West African cinemas, but it lacks an in-depth focus on the representation of local power structures.

Recently, another theoretical framework relevant to the analysis of African cinemas has made impact on the research in this field: the theory of transnational cinema. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden explain in their book *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (2006) that any notion of homogenous national identity is an impossible concept and instead, there exist global forces that connect people and institutions across nations. They continue by claiming that transnational cinema is not a new concept because both independent cinema and Hollywood have been benefitting from international locations, actors, funding, and distribution for some time. Therefore, the existence of such a global network in which everyone has access to films from distant regions and can in turn distribute their own films to audiences far away means that the binary oppositions between the West and the rest of the world cannot be substantiated.

In the context of African cinemas, transnational cinema theory suggests that the authenticity of African cinemas cannot be defined by its rejection of all things European (Murphy 2000: 241), as there has always been an influence of mainstream cinema on African audiences, and African filmmakers have often studied in the West. Nevertheless, by no means does the transnational cinema theory renounce the earlier theories that influenced it, which is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Murphy’s article written for a ‘Postcolonial Cinema’ conference has been included in Ezra and Rowden’s book. Indeed, the two editors acknowledge the other theories as steps on the path towards the recognition that cinematic production and cinematic imagination have always been a matter of global cooperation (2006: 13).
What transnational cinema also emphasizes, in rupture with Third Cinema, is the intertwining of the ‘First’, ‘Second’, and ‘Third worlds’ that gives rise to diasporic cinema. Often consisting of a collective of individuals from a shared ‘Third world’ location, diasporic cinema is characterised by a sense of hybridity and longing for an idealised version of homeland (Naficy in Ezra and Rowden 2006: 114). Following Hamid Naficy’s comments, Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010: 10) summarize transnational cinema as being acutely aware of the insider/outsider and centre/margin relationships as well as the continuing negotiation between the global and local. However, in order to achieve a strong standing as a critical theory, Higbee and Lim suggest that transnationalism should be conscious of the historical, cultural, and ideological specificities of each film considered in terms of its theory (2010: 10).

In summary, the above three theories have come under shared criticism for not tending to pay enough attention to the representation of issues and identities that are specifically local. For this reason, the above theories are not suitable frameworks for this thesis, which aims to analyse the cinematic representations of identities linked to local West African ethnicities. Nevertheless, it would be shortsighted to reject the significant points these theories have made in the research on Francophone West African cinemas. Therefore, this thesis incorporates some aspects of postcolonial, Third Cinema and transnational cinema theories, by drawing attention to the larger power structures that may be affecting the representations of identities in francophone West African cinemas. The following section explains how this incorporation of the above theories shapes the structure of the thesis, and introduces the theoretical framework used in this thesis.

i.vii Theoretical influences and Gilles Deleuze

In order to reflect the fact that representations of identities are influenced by both local and global factors, this thesis considers both theoretical work about the specific context of Francophone West Africa as well as the theories that identify Western influences on the region. Using textual analysis of the films as a base for the arguments in the chapters, the thesis is able to illustrate how the
representations of identity can be interpreted with reference to both theory and contextual knowledge. For example, since societal status in Francophone West Africa is determined by kinship but also increasingly by class, both of these aspects will be considered in the analysis of the representations of societal status. Likewise, representations of women will be assessed using a multifaceted approach of African and Western feminism. The final chapter will look at representations of belief using the concepts of both indigenous spirituality and global religions. Essentially, this method of analysing representations of identities reflects the ways in which identities in Francophone West Africa are influenced by indigenous as well as Western cultural and social systems. It is based on the region’s continuing cultural, political and economic ties with Europe, especially its former colonial power France, and also on the emerging pressures of an increasingly globalised world. Since the project acknowledges the multiple influences on Francophone West African identities and their representations, it also recognizes that this multiplicity of influences has a fragmenting effect on the understanding of identity.

One of the central aims of this thesis is to show how films from the three countries discussed portray identity as fragmented and, because of this, it will be necessary to invoke and engage with poststructuralist understandings of identity as composite, multiple and fluid. The complexity of the situation in Francophone West Africa and especially the representations of identity in the films below necessitate recourse to Hall’s descriptions of identity as a ‘process of becoming, rather than being’ (2012: 4). Hall’s turn of phrase unequivocally, though without a direct reference, points in the direction of the philosophy of becoming advocated by the 20th century philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In his theoretical works, Deleuze seeks to challenge accepted interpretations of Continental philosophers, countering their thought with his distinctly anti-hegemonic argumentation. His tendency to argue against the dominant theoretical currents of his time corresponds with the aim of this thesis to question the current approaches towards analysing contemporary Francophone West African film. Some of Deleuze’s work covers cinema specifically, so this will be the basis for the use of his philosophy in this project, but other
aspects of his thought, including the conceptualisations of rhizome and becoming, are equally applicable and will also be incorporated. The interpretative nature of Deleuze’s work offers the opportunity to bridge the gap in film theory application in studies of Francophone African cinema, and to encourage modification of Deleuze’s work on film alongside the debate on film theory in West African cinema.

There have already been some forays into applying Deleuze’s theoretical concepts to the field of West African film, namely by David Norman Rodowick and Dudley Andrews. Rodowick links Deleuze’s concept of becoming-other with the struggles of West African filmmakers to ‘adequately represent the claims of postcolonial African identity’ (1997: 166). He praises Ousmane Sembène for drawing on ‘African history’ in order to transform it into a cinematic language (1997: 165). Rodowick implies that ‘African history’ is a valuable resource for representing contemporary ‘African’ identities; this suggests that ethnic identity, which is rooted in ethnic histories, is the kind of identity that is being represented. Elsewhere, Andrews finds Deleuze’s concept of the ‘nomadic’ (principle of thought based on fluidity) to be a fitting description of post-1980s West African cinema, with its recurring non-linear narratives and images of landscape (2000: 231-3). Both authors use Deleuzian concepts as theoretical backbones of their analysis, drawing on Deleuze to help them explore the more complex themes in ‘African’ cinema in more detail. In their writing, Rodowick and Andrew distinctly avoid using Deleuze in any way that could be misconstrued as a patronising use of Western theory to interpret non-Western cinematic productions.

Their approach inspires the level and tone of engagement with Deleuze’s theory that I aim to achieve in this thesis. There are certain risks associated with employing the theoretical work of a notable Western philosopher, even one as challenging to the European philosophical establishment as Deleuze, in the context of West African cinema. Firstly, there is a chance that the complexity of Deleuze’s theory overshadows the main focus of this thesis, which is using textual analysis to explore how ethnic and other identities are represented in Francophone West African cinemas. In order to counter this potential problem, the discussion of Deleuze’s
theoretical work in the thesis narrows down to a small number of concepts, which are referred to throughout the chapters. Although this means that only a small part of Deleuze’s extensive body of work will be addressed, it also allows the thesis to delve more deeply into how these concepts work when applied in this specific context.

Secondly, while this project relies on some of Deleuze’s theoretical work, it is also acutely aware of the academic debate around using Deleuze in the context of the African continent. The most prominent criticism of Deleuze in this respect comes from the literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who in her influential essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ accuses Deleuze and his collaborator Felix Guattari of failing to consider the relations between desire, power and subjectivity [which] renders them incapable of articulating a theory of interests. In this context, their indifference to ideology (a theory of which is necessary for an understanding of interests) is striking but consistent. (Spivak 1988: 273)

In her essay, Spivak identifies a problem with the way in which Deleuze conceptualizes desire and interest as being the same in their influence on subjectivity. She argues that this leaves Deleuze blind towards the dominant Eurocentric ideology he is a part of, and the possibility that by conflating the terms he is homogenising the subject. In other words, Spivak criticizes Deleuze for claiming that the oppressed (the proletariat or the colonised peoples) have just as much power to speak for themselves as their oppressors. She sees this as a privileged point of view.

Spivak’s criticism of Deleuze serves as a caution to those who wish to apply his theories in a non-Western context; it is a reminder that the side effect of the use of Deleuzian conceptualisations may result in espousing the same privileged point of view he has been accused of. Spivak’s evaluation of Deleuze’s problematic relation to ‘the subaltern’ has informed my approach to certain aspects of Deleuze’s
theoretical work. More specifically, while I find some of Deleuze’s identity-related concepts, such as becoming, useful for thinking about particular forms of identity, I disagree with Deleuze’s overarching argument against the existence of identity. He claims that

what has collapsed is the sovereignty of identity in representation. The Human is traversed by an essential disparity, (...) separated from itself by its words, its works, and its desires. And in this revolution that explodes representation, it is no longer difference that must be subordinated to the same, but the same that must be said of the Different. (2004: 91)

Deleuze proclaims that identity does not exist because representation is always different from the original. Everything is different and therefore difference should be the dominant concept, and identity and repetition should be subordinated to it. The problem with this statement is very similar to the objection Spivak raised against Deleuze’s homogenising attitude towards subjectivity, which is his frequent obliviousness towards the role of ideology in his thought. By claiming that identity does not exist and that difference is the driving force of humanity, Deleuze devalues the claiming of identities by black people in Africa and elsewhere which worked as a response to colonial powers emphasizing their own difference. This argument seems to be moving the bar of theoretical discussion of identity at the precise moment in time when black Africans are able to creatively express their identities and produce evidence that racial and other types of difference are not as significant as initially thought. Therefore, in order to distance the thesis from this potential line of criticism, the concept of identity will remain a crucial focus for the discussion of the Francophone West African films below. Having critically examined the concept of identity, the following part of this introduction focuses on the next concept used throughout this thesis.

i.viii On representation

Further to Deleuze’s understanding of representation as a second-order reality, rather than a direct intervention in the realm of the real, the counter-argument is
similar to the above: representation may have an alternative and greater
significance in the context of African cinemas. In response to Spivak’s question
whether ‘the subaltern’ can speak and thus represent themselves, cultural studies
scholar Handel Kashope Wright asserts that

the African is always already misrecognised, and against the
blare and the glare of outer-continental identifications, the
contemporary African cannot speak. Even when Africans
have articulated African cultural identities in creative works
(...), their voices have been appropriated in the West. (2002: 2)

Wright highlights the fact that representation is important for African artists but it
is then overwhelmingly misinterpreted and filtered through the thematic categories
of Western knowledge production. These Western thematic categories fail to
translate what is being represented in African artworks, since Western systems of
knowledge production, according to Wright, are biased against the meanings and
messages specific to many African creative works. For this reason, cultural ways of
belonging outside of nationality, class or religion, concepts which form the
dominant forms of belonging in the West, are often not recognised in the analyses
of representation in Francophone West African films. This thesis acknowledges this
issue by engaging in the analysis of both these and other more locally-relevant
aspects of identity.

The lack of understanding of these representations can, in fact be traced back to
the history of representation of the African continent and its people in mainstream
cinema. As film scholars Robert Stam and Louise Spence point out, mainstream
depictions of Africa included distorting stereotypes of Africans but also excluded
This way, Western systems of knowledge production have not been required to
translate the meanings in the representation of African ethnic cultures and
identities. To illustrate the need for understanding African representation, Stam
and Spence give the example of early Francophone West African films, namely La
*Noire de...* (Ousmane Sembéne, 1966), which uses framing and voiceover to encourage audience identification with the Senegalese maid working for a white French couple, rather than leaving the audience to identify with the Europeans (2004: 889). West African filmmakers continue to take advantage of audience identification through representation of African identities, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, to contradict the history of racist and Eurocentric representation of the African continent and its people.

Additionally, Stam and Spence draw attention to the need for representation of language in non-Western cinemas (2004: 882). All of the films surveyed in this thesis are either partially or entirely spoken in the indigenous languages of the ethnic groups the films are set within. In *Keita, Aujourd’hui* and *Djanta*, some characters occasionally speak French, mostly in instances when educational institutions are involved. *Keita* directly mentions that the use of the French language symbolizes the impact of a Western-style of education and lifestyle on the film’s young protagonist, whereas *Djanta* and *Aujourd’hui* present French as the default mode of communication with people of differing ethnicities residing in a city. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes that language has always been central to the African people’s fight against neo-colonial practices of the West (1994: 4). Thus, the fact that a number of Francophone West African filmmakers choose to make their films in ethnic languages and provide French subtitling afterwards shows that they prioritise ethnic identification and the anti-colonial struggle over the marketability of their films outside Africa. However, since I cannot speak any of the ethnic languages in the films, I had to rely on the French and English subtitling. This inevitably impacts the scope of my analysis of the films’ dialogue but it also enables me to make subsidiary points on the continuing importance of representing ethnic identities through language. Finally, following the above discussion of representation is a brief outline of the chapter structure of this thesis.
i.ix Note on chapter structure

This thesis is divided into four chapters that examine, in this succession, the representations of ethnic, kinship, gender and religious identities in the selected Francophone West African films. In Chapter One I begin my exploration of the representations of ethnic identities on screen by surveying how ethnicity has been theorized by West African and Western scholars, before moving on to discuss its conflation with race and its underrepresentation in academic discussion in film studies. Here, I will also look at how the concept of authenticity impacts the understanding of how ethnic identities are represented, while critiquing authenticity as a thinly veiled desire for control over ‘the Other’. After consulting discourses on representations of national identity, I will suggest how representations of ethnic identities can be analysed and proceed to exemplify this approach in my analysis of two films representing Mande ethnic identities: Keita, the Heritage of the Griot and Guimba the Tyrant.

Beyond establishing the relevance of kinship and class in West African power structures, Chapter Two investigates the representations of social hierarchies and social status in the following three films: Faro: La Reine des Eaux, Delwende and Aujourd’hui. Building upon the significance of ethnic identities presented in the previous chapter, this section focuses on how social status is represented in societies that rely on indigenous power structures as well as on the growing class hierarchy. The chapter also critiques the often excessive focus on the social issues represented in Francophone West African films, which draws attention away from systemic inequalities of the social order.

Chapter Three engages in a discussion about how gender identity representation can be analysed in reference to specifically African brands of feminism. This chapter scrutinizes the extent to which ethnic identities are represented as having an impact on the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in Mossane, Djanta and Taafe Fanga. At the same time, this chapter also examines the possibility of interpreting the films in relation to Deleuze and Julia Kristeva’s conception of time, as a means
of expressing the effect of historical time on gender identity representation in Francophone West African cinemas.

Departing from the layout of the previous chapters, Chapter Four aims to illustrate the interlacing of ethnic, kinship and gender identities with spirituality and religious identities. This approach hopes to highlight the intersectional nature of identity and its representation on screen. Mirroring the fact that spirituality is a substantial theme in Francophone West African cinemas, this part of the thesis studies how *Ndeysaan* and *Timbuktu* represent the intersections between spirituality and the three types of identities discussed in the previous chapters.

Adopting this approach to analysing the representations of identities in Francophone West African cinemas enables this thesis to consider local ways of belonging and how they intersect, without isolating their representations from influences beyond the local context.
Chapter One

Representations of Ethnic Identities

One of the principal questions frequently resurfacing in the discourse on Francophone West African cinemas is what identities are being represented and how. The focus of this chapter will be on ethnicity, a form of identity which, despite its considerable role in a number of films coming out of this region, attracts a disproportionately smaller academic commentary. Indeed, many academic discussions do not mention ethnicity, even though that is essentially what scholars are referring to. The discussions often use descriptive terms such as ‘cultural identity’ (Thackway 2006: 30), ‘heritage’ (Andrews 2000: 234), ‘national cultural identity’ (Armes 2006: 109) or ‘post-colonial identity’ (Mhando 2014: 14). These terms attempt to highlight a certain level of specificity, hence the use of ‘cultural’ and ‘heritage’ but they locate the specificity within Eurocentric notions of belonging (nation, colony). Perhaps this is a consequence of ‘fetishising the national’ (Higson 2000: 64) in film studies in European cultures, whereby the complexity of identities beyond the ‘national’ is regularly ignored (Higson 2000: 66). In the African context, the exclusion of ethnicity from film studies discourses can also be a symptom of the widely-criticised notion of Africa as a single community, which is reinforced with every use of the umbrella term ‘African cinema’.¹⁴ Whatever the cause of the omission, the aim of this chapter is to suggest diversifying the current discourse on identity representation in contemporary Francophone West African cinemas by including a discussion of ethnic identity.

This chapter will first look at how ethnicity has been theorized by West African philosophers and Western scholars before proceeding to survey the uses of the

¹⁴ There has been some progress regarding this issue, with a growing number of scholars narrowing down the scope of their research through regional (Tomaselli 2006), linguistic (Diop 2004), thematic (Tcheuyap 2005), genre (Petty 2009), etc. focuses. More specificity being introduced in the research on films from the African continent means a better chance of researchers seeing the different ways of belonging represented in the films.
term in the field of film studies. Here, the chapter discusses the conflation of ethnicity with race, as well as the questioning of authenticity when representing ethnicity on screen. Following this, there will be a comparison of ethnic identity with national identity in order to see whether academic work on national identity in cinema can be adapted for the context of Francophone West African cinemas. This will lead to an outline of the themes and techniques which can be used to represent ethnicity on screen. In order to substantiate the chapter’s theoretical claims, the chapter will conclude with a demonstration of the ways in which ethnicity is shaped and represented through a critical analysis of two films: *Keita, the Heritage of the Griot* (Dani Kouyaté, 1995) and *Guimba the Tyrant* (Cheick Oumar Sissoko, 1996). These two films have been selected because they both give accounts of Mande ethnic identities, despite having been made in two different countries by filmmakers of differing nationalities but of the same ethnic ancestry. The purpose of this undertaking is to highlight the continuing significance of ethnic identity and to identify how it can be represented on film.

Prior to the discussion of the definition of ethnicity, it is essential to outline the theoretical concepts that will run through the analysis of ethnic identity in this chapter. The theoretical framework of the chapter is inspired by David Martin-Jones’ use of Gilles Deleuze in his analysis of how national identity is represented through film narrative (Martin-Jones 2006: 1-15). This part of the thesis relies on the two volumes on cinema by Deleuze (*Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, 1986; *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, 1989), and particularly employs his thoughts on time and cinematic narrative to theorize representations of ethnic identity in Francophone West African cinemas. Although there are two exceptions when parts of Deleuze’s work have been briefly applied in analysis of West African cinema (Andrew 2000, Rodowick 1997), it is otherwise rare for scholars to apply it in this field of study. The engagement with Deleuze’s time-image theories has been imperative in this study because it allows for an understanding of temporality that connects past to present and this is depicted in many of the films discussed here. In particular, portrayals of ethnic identity in the films demand such an understanding.
of the interconnectedness of past and present, arguably because they portray ethnicity as defined by strong links to the (pre-colonial) past. Yet, there are also theoretical weaknesses, which will be identified as they arise, when Deleuze’s thought fails to apply to a non-European context. In fact, David Martin-Jones calls for more studies of Deleuze’s relevance to world cinemas, if only to question some of the conclusions Deleuze makes in the Cinema volumes (2011: 237). Furthermore, due to certain similarities between representations of national identities in European cinemas and representations of ethnic identities in Francophone West African cinemas, the chapter draws on discussions about national cinemas by Anthony Smith, Wendy Everett as well as Martin-Jones. These crucial interventions offer a rich foundation for the exercise this project will undertake, and from which many of the analyses of the films below will derive. First, however, the following section will establish the key ideas in the discussion about the representation of ethnic identities.

1.1 Ethnic identities: theory and representation

Representations of any form of identity have an active role in its preservation and evolution. Stuart Hall explains that the process of representation involves both creation and re-creation of what is being represented:

> how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role (original emphasis). (Hall 1996: 443)

In her book Africa Shoots Back (2006), Melissa Thackway builds on Hall to suggest that cinematic representation can be a tool for reclaiming identity. The prolonged denial of identity and indigenous culture during the French colonial occupation of West Africa, writes Thackway, has meant that filmmakers use their work ‘not as a “neutral” reproduction of reality, but as an active means of defining identities’ (2006: 37). The need to represent voices and images from West Africa continues, in order to counter the impact of images of West Africa that have been exploited as a backdrop to non-African film productions, reducing the region into a collection of
photographic surfaces. Joseph Gugler identifies three types of ‘windows on [the African] continent’ (2003: 1), including Western feature films, news and documentaries, all of which present a distorted, mostly negative image of the region and its inhabitants. In the face of such negative representation, Francophone West African filmmakers have responded by adapting cinematic language to reflect the region’s oral cultures, its connection to the land and ancestors as well as the numerous ethnic communities that exist within and across the region’s national borders. The films that continue to come out of this effort can therefore be seen as representing diverse identities as well as becoming a part of them.

Nevertheless, studying representations of identity, and especially ethnic identity, ought to be approached with caution because the conclusions drawn from research on this topic can be susceptible to bias. Philosophers Paulin Hountondji and Marcien Towa are among those who have voiced their unease about some of the research on African ethnicities. They are wary of a tendency to present African ethnicities as a shared experience of tradition that lacks plurality and is based on difference from the West (2009: 4-6). Hountondji demonstrates that difference is a lazy shorthand for discussing African ethnicities by non-African thinkers. When African ethnicities are seen as being governed by rules different from Western notions of ethnicity, the concepts that are usually applied to ethnicity, such as plurality and adaptability, are not mentioned as commonly as tradition, for instance. The persistent emphasis on difference in Western accounts of African ethnicities is by no small amount reinforced by some African research activity, which, Hountondji declares, is ‘externally oriented, intended to meet the theoretical needs of our Western counterparts and answer the questions they pose’ (2009: 8). While Hountondji does not suggest that African research on this topic is completely biased, he hints at the fact that Western academia may not be asking the right questions and African scholars may not be questioning the origins of their theoretical assumptions. What

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15 Christopher L. Miller, for instance, maintains that African ethnicities are different from European ethnicities and their representations should therefore be studied with references to anthropology. He also emphasizes the limited relevance of Western theory to the African experience (Miller 1999: 29).
Hountondji claims seems to be missing from the discourse on African ethnicities is an approach that critically applies both African and Western theoretical frameworks to the topic.

Analysing representations of ethnic identity in film therefore requires a balanced approach that takes into account the specificities of the context as well as pre-existing theoretical frameworks. However, this balance remains difficult to achieve, if debates in related academic fields are anything to go by. Graham Huggan informs us that the use of anthropology and ethnography in the field of African literature has provoked an ongoing debate: those who embrace anthropology argue that it provides a better understanding of the African context, whereas those who reject it blame it for an idealised, static view of African cultures (2001: 37-8). Huggan points out that the real issue is the ‘role that an ostensibly postcolonial literature is made to play within neocolonial knowledge networks’ (2001: 57). In other words, it is important to first understand the conditions which enable the construction of certain cultural knowledge as ‘foreign’. Additionally, there is also the debate about the use of Western theoretical frameworks in non-Western contexts. This is discouraged by Miller who sees it as an ‘assimilation of Africa into the categories of the West’ (1999: 23). Hountondji, on the other hand, defends the use of non-African thought by claiming that some concepts are universal and that Western, Indian or Chinese philosophies can be applicable to knowledge production on the African continent (2009: 6). Both of the debates described above effectively substantiate Huggan’s point: there is a perceived epistemological gap between African and Western cultural productions. What this means for any studies of representations of ethnic identity in Francophone West Africa is that this gap should be critically engaged with. By utilizing arguments and theories from both sides of this divide, it may be possible to highlight its artificiality while also offering new insights into representation of ethnic identities.

In this chapter, as in the rest of the thesis, I rely on anthropological and ethnographical data for a better contextualisation of the representations of ethnic identities. In order to at least partially avoid the trap of idealising/fixing ethnic
cultures that Huggan associates with this approach, I use my film analysis to determine both the constitutive and reflexive roles of identity representation on screen, as per Hall’s account of representation. This allows me to view ethnic identity representation with sufficient contextualisation and as an evolving phenomenon that is being re-created but also critiqued in the films. Unlike what Miller proposes, however, I also use segments of Western theory (Deleuze) where applicable, in addition to anthropology and ethnography. The reasoning behind this approach is informed by the facts that 1) film is a highly intertextual medium, 2) majority of the films in this thesis were made by directors who received practical and theoretical training in film and are therefore actively aware of Western film theory, and 3) one of the aims of this project is to contribute to the bridging of the gap between Western film theory and Francophone West African cinemas. By combining these two areas more thoroughly, it is possible to analyse Francophone West African films as both cinematic pieces of art while also acknowledging the specific nature of the issues they address and represent. Since this approach understands the following films to be subjective and stylized representations of ethnic identities, it runs into questions of credibility.

Questioning of authenticity inevitably follows any analysis of the representations of ethnic identity, doubly so if these ethnic identities are found outside the Western world. Rey Chow claims that this urge to ‘return the native to her authentic origin’ (1993: 36) is based on the assertion of ‘an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own “fake” experience’ (1993: 53). According to Paul Bowman, Chow aims to discredit the idea that the ‘ethnic subject’ possesses some kind of simplistic insight on an overly complex Western world (2010: xi). In other words, the search for authenticity is a veiled assumption of simplicity of the

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16 Kouyaté, Sissoko, Faye, Ouedraogo and Gomis trained in France, Sissako in the former USSR, Drabo in Mali, Yameogo in the USA.
17 The term ‘authenticity’ in this context describes the attempts to rationalize the desire for a person/cultural product to display stereotypical characteristics and/or behaviours commonly associated with the larger group to which the individual/object belongs. This understanding of the word derives from Chow’s report on the discomfort felt by Western scholars about the ‘fact that the natives are no longer staying in their frames’ (Chow 2003: 325). Chow’s turn of phrase provides a fortuitous formulation of this chapter’s intention to identify the insufficiency of national/postcolonial identities which often frame the analysis of francophone West African films.
non-Western population. Any representations of indigenous people that use the label of authenticity, says Gareth Griffiths, are a form of overwriting the complex actuality of difference equal but opposite to the more overt writing out of that voice in earlier oppressive discourses of reportage. (1994: 70)

The search for authenticity is therefore an ambition to create a hermetic, homogenous version of indigenous populations, regardless of the ever-changing nature or the complexity of their identities. Earlier on, Huggan commented on how using anthropology in postcolonial literary analysis results in a fixation on authenticity (2001: 37-8). Bowman echoes these comments when he highlights ‘the factualism that typifies anthropology’s hold on representation’ (2010: 153). Yet, Bowman also adds that if the focus is on representation in fiction film, then questioning authenticity and anthropological representation is self-defeating. Fiction film already filters representation through a subjective point of view of those involved in making the film. By doing so, however, it also adds its voice to the discussion about representation, thus invariably illustrating the ‘actuality of difference’ that Griffiths speaks of. What then remains to be addressed is the variety of frameworks used to interpret representation in Francophone West African cinemas.

The most popular theoretical framework used to analyse the films from the African continent has been postcolonial theory (see Murphy and Williams 2007, Harrow 2007, Langford forthcoming). For instance, Murphy appropriately emphasizes the continuing impact of European social and economic ties to the African continent when he proposes that

the category of the post-colonial offers a better framework within which to examine the cinematic production of those countries that were formerly colonies of the Western imperial powers. (2000: 247)
The postcolonial framework indeed offers a necessary critical tool for interpretation of Francophone West African cinemas, especially given the evolving relationship between the former imperial centres and the peripheries of the colonial empires. Still, the framework can miss some of the readings of films that do not negotiate lives along the postcolonial ‘periphery’ as their main objectives. This thesis extends the readings of Francophone West African films to include some of the meanings that may have been lost in the postcolonial framework, and as such it can be considered a supplementary study rather than a part of the postcolonial research field. Nevertheless, the focus of this thesis, i.e. the cinematic representations of ethnic identity, intersects with areas of postcolonial research that consider representations of race and nationality in cinema. The following section will outline the often problematic ways in which the concepts of race, nationality and ethnicity overlap.

1.2 The overlapping of ethnicity, race, and nationality

Ethnicity is often used interchangeably with race and the separate meanings of these two terms have been collapsed. Although the two terms may appear similar in how they are used to delineate separate groups, they are in fact very different approaches to constructing identity. Crucially, race and ethnicity are dependent on the context in which they are conceptualized. As a commentator on the black experience in Britain, Hall has taken up the task of defining race as a ‘collective concept (...) mediated through and affected by the whole body of stereotyped attitudes and beliefs’ (Hall 1969: i). For Hall, race is a term that signifies the marginalization of ‘black’ people in a white society and as such cuts across ethnic and cultural differences between ‘black’ communities. Ethnicity, on the other hand, ‘acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity’ (Hall 1996: 446). Both race and ethnicity, Hall conveys, influence the building of one’s identity but race is a form of resistance to white hegemony while ethnicity roots one in their culture of origin regardless of their race. Correspondingly, in the context of Francophone West African cinemas, race is mentioned as a framework for analysis only in relation to early films from the
region, namely Med Hondo’s *Soleil O* (1969) (Ukadike 1994: 79-83; Thackway 2006: 127-130). Films like *Soleil O* and early Sembène productions made in the post-independence era respond to the atmosphere of resistance to colonial racism, so race is a prominent theme in these films. The further one moves away from cinematic production in this era however, the less urgent of an issue race becomes and other forms of belonging emerge as themes.

In Francophone West Africa, ethnicity as a mode of identity construction increasingly competes with nationality. The national borders of the countries of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, the area which this project will focus on, are transcended by a large family of ethnic groups called the Mande peoples. As noted in the literature review, the Mande peoples branch into several groups and sub-groups, with each group sharing a common language or dialect and culture. The fact that ethnic identity in Francophone West Africa seems to supersede any other forms of identity, such as nationality or race is partly due to its use as a political as well as a cultural and social tool (Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka 2004: 1-3). The continuing significance of ethnicity usefully summarized by Malian scholar and filmmaker Manthia Diawara in his partially autobiographical book *In Search of Africa* (1998: 36):

That afternoon in Conakry, as I walked away from the drums and the celebration, I felt the power of ethnic difference over racial and national unity in West Africa. Race and nationality are still modern concepts for us.

Diawara points out that ethnic allegiance remains strong in Francophone West Africa, despite the attempts first of the French colonial government and later of the independent West African governments to unify ethnic groups living within countries’ borders and force them to form coherent nations. As Diawara says, nationality is a new way of understanding identity in Francophone West Africa. Even though it has been over 55 years since the three countries became independent

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18 This has led to political tensions between ethnic groups in francophone West Africa. For example, see the Casamance conflict in Senegal, where the Diola majority in the region has been protesting the Senegalese government injustices against them for over two decades (Evans 2004: 42).
from France and started forging new national identities, it is a far shorter period of
shared identity than that of the centuries-old sense of belonging based on shared
ethnicity experienced by the Mande people. This does not mean that ethnic identity
is unresponsive towards modernisation; Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka opine that

contemporary ethnic communities and identities in Africa
did not and will not fade away with the inevitable advance of
global modernity, but rather represent critical aspects of the
particular African experience of modernity itself. They are
the outcomes of continuous and continuing processes of
social construction emanating from the encounters of
indigenous societies with the political economy and culture
of the West. (2004: 3-4)

According to the three authors, it is ethnicity rather than nationality that functions
as the type of belonging that responds dynamically to the continuous pressures of
modernity and globalization, while also preserving the particularities of indigenous
lifestyle and society. Yet, due to their historical persistence, African ethnicities also
face a number of negative associations and criticisms.

Some scholars perceive ethnicity as a set of antiquated principles that threatens
the creation of national identity and culture in postcolonial Africa. In The Wretched
of the Earth (1963), Frantz Fanon fiercely attacks ‘primitive tribalism’ in Senegal
(1963: 164) and blames the bourgeoisie of the newly independent African states for
failing to create a sustainable national consciousness. He summarizes: ‘African unity
takes off the mask, and crumbles into regionalism inside the hollow shell of
nationality itself’ (1963: 128). Fanon’s stance against ethnicity is consistent with
his Marxist views. Guibernau and Rex note that Marxists regard ethnicity ‘as a form
of false consciousness which would be replaced in due course by a consciousness of

19 The crucial role of ethnicity in sustaining poor communities in West Africa is outlined by
international development and politics scholar Seyoum Y. Hameso. He argues that ethnicity provides
reliable social, economical and educational support in the form of ethnic unions to people otherwise
failed by the state (1997: 14). In fact, in its propensity to strengthen communities, ethnicity sounds
very similar to Fanon’s ‘African unity’, the loss of which Fanon seems to mourn. According to
Hameso, ethnicity in Africa offers unity in the face of external political and economic domination and
thus creates a sense of security and belonging that is not provided by African states. These states do
not have the social and cultural continuity of African ethnic groups, which is why they are not the
primary sources of self-identification for Africans.
shared and opposed interests’ (2010: 2). Further to Fanon’s point about the bourgeoisie creating new national consciousness, the majority of these elites would have been educated in the West and their understanding of nationality would have been founded on their knowledge of European nationalism. Such knowledge would not, however, be easily applicable on the African continent. The new nations here were not based on any of the large cultural systems (religion, dynasty) that Benedict Anderson lists as the foundations of nations in Europe (2006: 116); as mentioned in the literature review, the borders of African nations were ratified by European colonial powers. Yet Fanon ignores the imposed artificiality of the colonial state borders and calls for a fight for a national culture in the new African states, claiming, ironically, that national culture is a form of liberation from the coloniser (1963: 87). He emphasizes that this national culture should not be a reiteration of the pre-colonial ‘folklore’ (1963: 188), rather it should be centred on ‘the peoples’ struggles’ (1963: 189). To illustrate his vision of what a national culture ought to look like, Fanon quotes at length a poem by Guinean Mande artist Kéita Fodéba,\(^{20}\) which, as Miller points out (1990: 55-6), actually considerably undermines his rejection of the importance of ethnicity in Africa. However, as Neil Lazarus explains at length, Miller tends to demonize Fanon’s assertions, to the point where Miller misses the fact that Fanon eventually admits that the realities of a nation do not always follow his argumentation (1999: 103). In other words, Fanon shows awareness that inhabitants of many African countries prioritise their ethnic identity over their nationality.

In light of Fanon’s problematic relationship with ethnicity, the ‘dismembered and dislocated’ present of a black man mentioned in Bhabha’s foreword to the 1986 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* necessitates a reinterpretation from an ethnic perspective. Bhabha describes how, in Fanon’s book, ‘the Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood’ (Bhabha 1986: xxv) because its

\(^{20}\) Miller argues that Fodéba clearly situates the poem in the Manding ethnic group’s region of Mali as he describes in detail the morning routine of the village, its hierarchical division of authority and some of the customary behaviours of its inhabitants. Fodéba particularly emphasizes the fact that when the elders talk about race, they mean membership of the Manding ethnic group and not a collective black race. Based on his rhetoric following the poem, Fanon seems to interpret ‘race’ as a summation of the populace of colonised Africa and therefore ignores the ethnically specific elements of the poem (Miller 1990: 55-7).
past is trapped in ‘stereotypes of primitivism’ (1986: xxv) and its present lacks distinct identity. Having acknowledged that Fanon writes in a specific time in history and is understandably more preoccupied with racial differences, one is nevertheless left to wonder whether Fanon is at least partially complicit in denying distinct ethnic identities to black people. He imagines his body dismembered and by that, he figuratively cuts off the legs that connect him to his ancestors’ land and the arms that embrace those in his kin. He becomes physically dislocated by being abroad but he is also mentally dislocated in that he ignores any connection with his ethnicity. The ultimate denial of ethnic identities comes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he speaks of Africans as either members of their nation or a unified whole. As demonstrated by his rejection of ethnic identities in Africa as ‘primitive tribalism’ (1963: 164), Fanon sees ethnic identities as atavistic instincts of the continent’s populace, in need of a ‘modernizing mission’ that would implement national identification. Yet, it should not be forgotten that the concept of national identity is deeply indebted to ethnic identities.

The historic continuity of ethnic identity is key to understanding ethnicity in the West African context and how it compares with the concept of nationality. Due to the fact that ethnicity is a term coined in the West and frequently used to denote difference from the West, its relevance to modern research on West African culture is contested. The term ethnicity may be problematic in its connection with colonial anthropology but the situation it aims to define is a historical fact. As Hameso argues, the division into ethnic groups has existed since the times of the great empires in West Africa during the European Middle Ages (1997: 18). Through storytelling, language, and customs, these groups have retained their ethnic identity in spite of colonialism and the nation-building of the post-independence era. Based on such resilience of ethnic identity, Hameso concludes that ethnicity in Africa is essentially what nationality stands for in Europe, only the nations are the

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21 Richard Jenkins, an anthropologist, explains that the term ethnicity was used to substitute the word ‘tribe’ in the 1960s (2008:18). ‘Tribe’, as used by anthropologists during the colonial era, implies a primitive organization of peoples and one that is antithetical to the civilized European society, thus creating a paradigm of difference. Ethnicity has seemingly inherited the earlier term’s affiliation with the colonial ‘Other’ and has come to symbolize a fundamental cultural and physical otherness.
real, indigenous West African nations of Mandinka, Dyula, etc. (1997: 9).

Furthermore, Hameso outlines signs of ethnic identity in West Africa that mirror what are generally understood as signs of national identity in Europe, including: objective characteristics (language, territory, dress), subjective characteristics (feeling of belonging to a distinct social space) or behavioural characteristics. In particular, the connection to a specific territory which exists despite the artificial division into countries by European colonial powers signals an important similarity to nationhood. Ethnicity is therefore a more historically grounded concept of identification in Francophone West Africa, whereas nationality can be seen as an inherited colonial phenomenon. Since ethnicity provides a much stronger connection to a shared history and culture, Hameso claims that it therefore has much more relevance and power over modern West Africans’ identities: it is their connection to their history and the history of their families. Ignoring ethnic identification in the region would mean denying the social, cultural and political structures that have been established prior to the European invasion and prioritising the state formations that have been set up by the colonial powers, regardless of the continuing active presence of these indigenous structures.

Given the parallel between ethnic identities in West Africa and national identities in Europe, it is worth considering portrayals of ethnic identity in Francophone West African cinemas in relation to the work done on the construction of national identity in cinema. In the introduction to the book *European Identity in Cinema* (2005), Wendy Everett explains that through her survey of European cinemas she has found that ‘the visual images of cinema, like the language of the dialogue, are perceived to be essential to the expression of national identity’ (2005: 12-13). Everett’s notion of the visual images as being a distinct expression of nationality conjures up the debate about the specific imagery of West African cinematography. Keyan G. Tomaselli, Arnold Shepperson and

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22 The reason why studies of ethnicity in film are not more widely referenced in this chapter is the frequent conflation of the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’, as discussed previously. In particular, studies of ethnicity in American and British cinemas drive this phenomenon (Julien and Mercer 1996; Wiegman 1998; Davies and Smith 2004).
Maureen Eke summarize the debate in their article titled *Towards a Theory of Orality in African Cinema* (1995) as they describe the role of African oral cultures and languages in shaping ‘new visual grammars’ (1995: 28) of ‘African’ filmmaking. According to them, the style of many ‘African’ directors is partially indebted to the nature of ‘African’ languages which, unlike European languages, describe the world in terms of relatedness of objects and persons and their spirituality. Tomaselli et al. also mention the influence of the continent’s oral cultures, which in West Africa specifically means the art and social role of the griots.

Peter Hitchcock outlines a list of key elements of ‘griot aesthetics’, which include shifting points of view across time and space, digressions, a story-within-a-story narrative progression, a search or journey, and the juxtaposition of mythological symbols or figures between the past and present. (2000: 276)

These aesthetic strategies manifest undeniably in the two films analysed in this chapter, suggesting that ethnic identity can be expressed through the visual language of cinema.

Everett also points to the significance of the language of the dialogue in communicating national identity (2005: 11). As mentioned in the literature review, all but two films in this thesis are spoken in the languages of the ethnic groups that are being represented, even though this severely limits the audience that can watch these films without subtitles. This suggests that the filmmakers find more value in representing West African ethnic groups and preserving their languages on screen than they do in reaching the widest possible audiences. However, as Armes specifies, regardless of what language a West African film is made in, the foreign financial backers will demand a script and subtitling in a European language (usually

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23 Murphy refuses the idea that ‘African cinema’ is substantially influenced by oral tradition as he argues that the relationship between cinema spectators and a film is unlike the relationship between a griot and his listeners because cinema spectators have to pay for the performance. The fact is, however, that griot’s listeners do have to pay a fee for his/her performance (see the scene in Keita that focuses on this transaction) or the griot has a patron who pays him/her a salary (Schulz 1997: 446, 453).
French) (2006: 57). French subtitling enables the directors and producers to present their films on the European film festival circuit, possibly leading to what Armes calls internationalised ‘author’s cinema’ (*cinéma d’auteur*), in which the crucial role the cinema can play in the affirmation of African identity is called into question. (2006: 57)

On the other hand, the growing trend of improvised projections of ‘African’ films across the African continent (Africa in Motion 2016) signals interest of the general populace in seeing and hearing films in their own languages. Due to this new accessibility of cinema as well as the diversification of films available to ‘African’ audiences, the chances of being seen by ethnic communities are improving for films that represent these groups and preserve their languages. Consequently, the continuing production and budding local reception of films in ethnic languages emphasizes the need for research into how ethnic identities, rather than national identities, are being represented.

Yet, contemporary West African films frequently contain more than one language of dialogue which problematizes any claims that representations are of just one ethnicity or of a single ethnic group. For example, in *Keita*, the city-dwelling parents speak mostly French while Djeliba (Sotigui Kouyaté), who lives in a rural area, only speaks Mandinka, one of the Mande languages. In this case, the French language is used to express aspiration and urban lifestyle whereas Mandinka is the language tied to the family’s history and cultural background, spoken in order to communicate with Djeliba and to tell the epic tale of the first Mande emperor, their ancestor. The relationship between the two languages in the film can be interpreted as an articulation of the tension and cohesion between ethnic identity and new identities developing as a consequence of life in a metropolitan environment. Clearly, it is not just ethnic identity being represented in this film. Rather, it is the interaction of ethnic identity with other identities which the

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24 Genova notes that ‘of the nearly two hundred operational movie houses in former French West Africa in the 1960s, only a handful remain standing today’ (2013: 162).
25 Sembène allegedly claimed that the major attraction of his films to the audiences in Senegal was the fact that they were in Wolof rather than in French (Ekwuazi 1991: 103-4).
The filmmaker uses to show the middle-ground between global and local identities. Since the parents have brought up Mabo (Hamed Dicko) as a multilingual child, speaking both French and Mandinka, Mabo, the film seems to show, reaps the benefits of both languages. He can use French to gain education and a career in the city, reflecting the emerging urban middle-class identity of his parents, while maintaining a sense of belonging to his ethnic community through speaking Mandinka. By speaking both languages, the character of Mabo symbolizes how ethnic and other identities coexist and affect each other, evolving, as Mabo does, through time. Through the multilingual Mabo, Keita shows that ethnic identity constantly develops, responding to the cultural/social/economic influences in the present and at the same time firmly connects to the ethnic group’s past. In the next section, this link between the present and the past will offer more insight into how ethnic identities can be conceptualized in terms of film narrative.

1.3 Ethnic identities as connection between the past and the present

In a book that uses Deleuzian theory to identify representations of national identity in cinema, Martin-Jones pays particular attention to films that highlight connections between the present and the past. Martin-Jones uses Deleuze’s philosophy of time in cinema in order to explain how film narratives show evolving national identity. According to Martin-Jones, linear narrative in film (relied on in Deleuze’s concept of movement-image)\(^\text{26}\) is used to re-territorialise national identity, in other words to ‘create (...) the illusion that there is one “correct” narrative of national identity’ (2006: 4). This is due to the controlled, tightly-edited nature of linear narratives. Non-linear narrative (prominent in Deleuze’s concept of time-image),\(^\text{27}\) on the other hand, de-territorialises national identity and points to

\(^{26}\) Deleuze states that ‘the shot is the movement-image. In so far as it relates movement to a whole which changes, it is the mobile section of a duration’ (1986: 22). Deleuze’s conception of movement-image rests on Bergson’s understanding of cinema as ‘extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence’ (1986: 23). In other words, cinema does not consist of a collection of still images because it is inherently bound by movement. The films that Deleuze identifies as movement-images are those that rely heavily on movement by using cinematic techniques such as editing, camera movement and Soviet montage (1986: 22-24).

\(^{27}\) Deleuze models time-image on Bergson’s theory of time as a duration that does not separate the past, the present or the future. Deleuze declares that ‘not only is the image inseparable from a
‘the seeming impossibility of finding one informing linear national narrative’ (2006: 4). Yet, there is no clear dividing line between these two types of narrative, as Martin-Jones explains (2006: 5); rather, they are positioned on a scale, with some hybrid films engaging both types of narrative to varying degrees.

Combinations of these two types of narrative are used by Francophone West African filmmakers, but instead of probing nationality, the filmmakers explore their ethnic identities. Interestingly, in the films that focus directly on ethnic identities, linear narratives with some elements of non-linearity are predominant, implying that the filmmakers share a single, uncritical understanding of ethnic identities. That sounds highly unlikely, however, as the filmmakers come from different ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds and should therefore have varying viewpoints on ethnic identities. An alternative explanation could be that due to the previous generation of filmmakers favouring social realist critiques of the post-independence era over representations of ethnic identity, the current generation feels the need to establish the narrative of ethnicity first before deterritorialising it. In particular, there appears to be a recurring strategy among some contemporary West African filmmakers to consult the mythical past in their narratives, in order to provide commentary on the present state of ethnic identity.

The comparison between film narrative and national identity in Martin-Jones’s book is partially informed by Homi K. Bhabha’s claims that the nation is narrated in double time. Bhabha writes that the nation is both seen as a continuation of its historical origins and also as a new, dissimilar version of its predecessors (1990: 295). This way, national identity is subject to constant renegotiation between the before and an after which belong to it, which are not to be confused with the preceding and subsequent images; but in addition it itself tips over into a past and a future of which the present is now only an extreme limit’ (1989: 38).

Bhabha identifies this as the split between what he calls the pedagogical, ‘an authority that is based on the pre-given and constituted historical origin in the past’ (1994: 144), and the performative, ‘demonstrat[ing] the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity’ (1994: 144). Where these two times, i.e. the contemporary and the historical, diverge, that is what Bhabha sees as ‘the site of narrating the nation’ (1994: 145). However, when applied to evolution of ethnic identity, Bhabha’s theory of narrating the nation (ethnic group, in this case), makes more sense when understood as a process of uniting rather than splitting the pedagogical and the
two times, the present and the past. In Francophone West Africa, ethnicity rather than nationality provides a historical link to the past as well as evidence of how society has changed since then. Tales of the emperor of Mali along with mythical histories of Mande families are recalled on special occasions or during griot performances, ensuring that the past of the ethnic group remains embedded in its present (Hale 2007: 19-24). However, Bhabha says that the past is remembered to demonstrate its difference from the present state of the nation and it draws attention to the progress that has been made over the centuries of the nation’s existence. This is in slight contradiction with Roy Armes’s explanation of why Francophone West African films so frequently relate to the past:

This placing of the past above the present, the personal above the social, was, however, not necessarily a withdrawal from social commitment. In choosing this path, the filmmakers were not ignoring current social or political problems, but rather finding – by distancing themselves from all-too-present immediate concerns – new ways of confronting them. (2006: 110)

Armes does not entirely dispute Bhabha’s notion of the past as a yardstick for progress but he suggests that, for contemporary Francophone West African filmmakers, the past is a resource for a better understanding of the present. In other words, filmmakers are looking for resonances between the past and the present, much like a griot would do, not focusing as much on the differences. As a consequence, the mythical past is accessed in Francophone West African cinemas in order to confront modern issues. For instance, Guimba the Tyrant is set in the mythical times in Mali and narrated by a griot but it has an obvious connection to the overthrowing of the Malian dictator Moussa Traoré in 1991.29 By reflecting a modern issue of dictatorship, which affects the nation as much as its ethnic groups, onto a canvas of the mythical past, Sissoko encourages a connection with the pre-colonial past and the way it is narrated by griots. It is thus possible that in Guimba,

performance. Through the griot’s narration, the double time in which the ethnic group exists is being reconciled rather than separated.
29 The director Cheick Oumar Sissoko was an active member of the resistance to Traoré’s regime (California Newsreel no date).
Sissoko aims to represent political resistance but instead of appealing to national identity, he appeals to the strong connection of ethnic groups in West Africa to their mythical past. In the context of Francophone West African cinemas, there seems to be less of a dissonance between the double time in which national (ethnic) identity is negotiated according to Bhabha and the past is much more aligned with the present.

The proximity between the past and the present in Francophone West African cinemas is affected by the recurring presence of the *griot* in many of the films.\(^{30}\) These popular storytellers bring the past in the form of myth and actual history of their community\(^{31}\) into the present, thus making sure that history of their ethnic group is remembered and celebrated. The *griot* also recounts family histories based on the surname\(^{32}\) of his listener and in so doing he aims to reinforce in his listener a bond with his family as well as with the history of the ethnic group the family belongs into, like Djeliba does in *Keita*. The pre-colonial past, whether historically accurate or mythical, is constantly under the surface of the present in Francophone West African cinemas, and it is frequently helped to resurface by the *griot*, who uses it to entertain and more importantly to give advice or a moral lesson. As Armes suggested above, the past is utilized by filmmakers as a tool for reframing modern issues and Isidore Okpewho, a scholar of oral literature, explains why the mythical past works so well in addressing problems in the present. Okpewho describes myth as a spectrum with fact on one end and fiction on the other:

> The closer a tale gets to historical reality, the less capable it is of being an illustration or vehicle of larger, timeless, abstract ideals. (...) But the other end of our arc is occupied

\(^{30}\) For more detail on the role and function of the *griot* in francophone West African cultural productions, see Valérie Thiers-Thiam (2004) or Thomas A. Hale (2007).

\(^{31}\) One of the most prominent *griots* in Senegal, Seckou Keita, lists the responsibilities of modern *griots*, which include keeping records of all the births, deaths and marriages of their village or their patron family (Keita 2014).

\(^{32}\) The Mande people have a specific way of finding out one another’s kinship relations and family ancestry in social situations. Every person has a *jamu*, a surname that he shares with all of his/her family members and it can be traced far back into the past. Certain *jamu* are associated with certain professions as well as psychological traits and historical events, and can therefore define the relationship and style of conversation of two people who have not met before. (Falola and Jennings 2002: 375-376; Miller 1990: 116).
by tales whose intellectual content is much stronger than in tales with a time-bound scheme (...). If such a scheme is accepted, then clearly the more ‘poetic’ a tale is, the stronger is its content of intellectual play and thus its availability for exploring larger cultural or existential (as against experiential) issues. (1983: 69)

Like the *griots*, the filmmakers are able to mould the timeless existential issues of the mythical past in order to find relevance to modern times. In fact, *griots* often feature as ‘time-binders’ (Hale 2007: 23) in films that reference the past in order to signal the connection between different temporalities. The mythical past remembered by ethnic groups and recounted by the *griots* is an essential dimension of ethnic identities in Francophone West Africa. Whenever a film depicts the mythical past as part of its diegetic time, it takes on the *griot’s* role of reframing the past to explore existential issues, therefore also updating the relevance of ethnic identities in dealing with such issues.

Going beyond Martin-Jones’ theory and directly to Deleuze might clarify this relationship between diegetic time and its depictions of the present and the past. As discussed earlier, the films analysed in this chapter cannot be classified as either movement-images or time-images, since they contain aspects of both.33 Yet, it is Deleuze’s concept of time-image that better addresses the temporal complexity of ethnic identity representation in *Keita* and *Guimba*. As outlined in the introduction, Deleuze is mostly concerned with post-war European cinema34 but his thoughts on the multiple layers of time in time-images appear relevant to contemporary West African cinema. For Deleuze, time-image

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33 Deleuze associates certain cinematic techniques with making a time-image, when he claims that ‘the tracking shots of Resnais and Visconti, and Welles’s depth of field, carry out a temporalization of the image or form a direct time-image’ (1989: 39). This makes application of the time-image theory to francophone West African films problematic because techniques such as deep focus and tracking shots often require budgets and infrastructure that are not readily available to most filmmakers in the region.

34 In Cinema 2, Deleuze briefly mentions Ousmane Sembène and compares him to other ‘third world’ filmmakers who make a ‘cinema of the speech-act’ (1989: 222). For Deleuze, the speech-act is a tool of the ‘third world’ cinema to decolonise itself, produce collective consciousness and to help its people to invent themselves freely (1989: 223-224).
clearly goes beyond the purely empirical succession of time – past-present-future. It is, for example, a coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order. (1989: xii)

In other words, the past, the present and the future are intertwined in time-image and they may not be experienced chronologically by the film protagonists. In both *Keita* and *Guimba*, some form of linearity of narration is preserved, however in the two films the present coexists with a mythical past narrated by a *griot*, and therefore seemingly contradicts the film’s linear time continuum. The recurrence of the past alongside the present challenges the chronology of linear time, suggesting that the two films follow the principles of time-image in order to present a narrative of ethnic identity.

Furthermore, the use of the mythical past alongside the present in some Francophone West African films utilizes what Deleuze calls ‘the powers of the false’ (1989: 126-127). This means that as alternative storylines disrupt the linear version of time, they also discredit a single version of what is true and allow several versions to be equally valid (as per Martin-Jones’ description of de-territorialisation). In *Keita* and *Guimba*, the mythical past enters into an interdependent relationship with the present, allowing ethnic identities to evolve in the present while being guided by the values and meanings originating in the past. This process is more symptomatic of re-territorialisation, and as such is in conflict with Martin-Jones’s claims that time-image questions, or de-territorialises, national identity (2006: 37). The incongruence marks a notable issue with the application of Martin-Jones’ theory of Deleuze’s time-image to non-European cinema, as time-image in West African cinema appears to construct ethnic identity rather than deconstruct it. The strong relationship between the past and the present in the two films means that the deterritorialising function of time-image does not have the same effect on representations of ethnic identity as it does on representations of national identity.
Exploring further possibilities of application of Deleuze’s theory\(^{35}\) to West African cinema, Dudley Andrew likens the relationship of the past and the present in Francophone West African films to the Sahel landscape of desert and baobab trees. Andrew contrasts the Sahel with

the great tree whose stature arrests the free movement of thought and cinema, turning filmmakers to a past represented by its roots. Ultimately, African cinema would yoke the dual impulses of liberty and identity, represented, respectively, by the open Sahel and the rooted baobab. (2000: 230)

In Andrew’s comparison, the baobab tree connects the past (roots) with the present in the form of identity (tree). Although Andrew does not mention what form of identity this may be, the only type of identity that is rooted in the past and at the same time has a significant cultural impact on West African filmmakers is ethnic identity. Thus, ethnic identity provides the link necessary for the past to resurface into the present. Yet, the comparison also makes a connection between ethnic identity, the present and the past that it integrates, and the West African landscape. The past in Andrew’s metaphor pervades the landscape and remains hidden until it is made visible again as a tree; the past is made apparent through ethnic identity.

The correlation between time and land and the significance of the two to national identity, and in this case to ethnic identity, is acknowledged by Bhabha as well. He compares the landscape of a nation-state to ‘the inscape of national identity’ and points out ‘the distractive presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present’ (1990: 295). However, what Bhabha sees as a ghostly grasp of the past on the present and the future of a nation, Francophone West African filmmakers view as a mystical connection of the land with their ancestors. The association of land with ancestry and the past is often

\(^{35}\) Andrew looks for Deleuze’s ‘soul of cinema’, which he believes is represented in the ever-changing, fluid nature of the concept of the ‘nomadic’ (2000: 215-216). Nomadic cinema is allowed to develop without any manipulation from studios, production companies and even auteurs. Since the West African sahel is mostly inaccessible to those influences and it is characterized by open space, Andrew situates nomadic cinema there.
conveyed through long shots of the landscape which Olivier Barlet describes as ‘indissociable from passing time’ (2000: 173). The films themselves then become part of ethnic identity because they preserve the space-time in which ‘the past lives in the present’ (Barlet 2000: 174). In a similar vein, Anthony Smith describes a process called the ‘territorialisation of memory’ in which ‘shared memories become attached to particular terrains’ (1996: 383). The past infiltrates the landscape through historical landmarks or through specific environments typical for the residing area of an ethnic group, as the close film analysis below will help to further illustrate. The land represents a record of an ethnic group’s history and lifestyle which is a significant material evidence of continuity in an otherwise oral society such as the Mande ethnic groups. Keita combines the orality of Mande peoples with frequent images of landscape and the following section will analyse how this can interpreted as a representation of ethnic identities.

1.4 Connecting landscape and orality in Keita

Keita is an exploration of the deep Mande past that is not part of institutional education but survives in the tales narrated by griots. The griot in this story, Djeliba Kouyaté, is struck by a sudden motivation to tell the story of the Mali Empire and King Sundjata Keita to the youngest member of the Keita clan. Mabo, who is the youngest descendant of the founder of the Mali empire, lives in Ougadougou and so the griot travels the length of the land to pass on the story and make sure that Mabo gets in touch with his ethnic identity. Mabo’s parents, however, have become accustomed to the lifestyle of the city and they prefer their son spending time getting education at school rather than learning about ethnic history. The boy forms

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36 There is a shared belief across many West African ethnic groups that after death, a person’s soul remains on Earth in order to provide guidance to the descendants (Mbiti 1991: 70). Spirits of ancestors can be found in sacred places, objects, animals etc., thus validating Barlet’s observations on the ubiquity of the past in African landscape.

37 The cinematic images of landscape infused with the past simultaneously activate the Deleuzian processes of re-territorialisation and de-territorialisation. Deleuze outlines how these processes work using an example of the book and the world: ‘contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an a parallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the de-territorialisation of the world, but the world affects a re-territorialisation of the book’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:11). In the same way, film de-territorialises reality and changes it to make apparent the ever-presence of the past in the landscape, while the present reality re-territorialises the film as it is made part of ethnic identity.
an attachment to the *griot* and his story, to the detriment of his time at school, and ultimately leading to his parents requesting the *griot* to leave. The *griot* uses his parting words to inform Mabo that ‘the future emerges from the past’ and that Mabo should continue to cultivate his ethnic identity by listening to other *griots’* tales. The film then concludes with a suggestion that Mabo has set off on a figurative quest to find out more about the Mande history.

For the majority of its duration, *Keita* relies on exterior locations which, as mentioned earlier, are linked to identification with one’s ethnic group. For instance, the village of the Mande king’s palace, where most of Djeliba’s story takes place, is set at the foot of the Sindou Peaks. Long shots of the peaks punctuate the sequences of the film set in the past, at times shrouded in mist and rain to foretell trouble and other times revealed as the dwelling of drum players announcing good news. The rocks’ appearance seems to correspond to what is going on in the village below. For instance, Sogolon gives painful birth to Sundjata which is accompanied by a shot of the rocks with the rain in the foreground so as to look like they are weeping for Sogolon’s suffering. Smith calls these locations ‘ethnoscapes’ because ‘the territory mirrors the ethnic community (…) - creating an ancestral “homeland”’ (2000: 55). Images such as those mentioned above qualify as a visual representation of national identity in Smith’s chapter about images of the nation. In *Keita*, the long shots of the Mande king’s village are used by the director to represent the ‘homeland’ of the Mande ethnic group and in so doing they also represent Mande ethnic identity. In fact, this spectacular site of narrow chains of rocky peaks is not far from the director Kouyaté’s birthplace, Bobo-Dioulasso (Armes 2008: 85). The fact that Kouyaté locates the village of the first Mande ancestor, king Sundjata, so close to his own ‘homeland’ reveals a very personal dimension of the representation of ethnicity in *Keita*. In other words, the director shows that he considers his own origin to have begun with the origin of the Mande ethnic group as it is known today.

Furthermore, the reoccurring theme of long journeys on foot across the former Mande empire shows a sense of connection and ownership of the land. At the beginning of the film, Djeliba walks to Ougadougou and as he passes from the left
side of the frame to the right, an ancient mosque and the river Niger appear in the background. Djeliba walks past these significant sites of the Mande land looking straight ahead as he walks along a forest road in the middle of a tracking shot (see Figure 2). Walking in a confident, steady pace he gives an impression of somebody who knows exactly what is around him, almost as if he owned the land himself. Yet, he does not tower over the landscape; he and the horizon are shot in an eye-level long shot. Upon entering the city, however, Djeliba’s confidence diminishes when he is forced to weave around cars to cross the road. The two Mande hunters in the mythical sequence of Keita display a similar knowledge of their environment. The hunters are even more in harmony with the land than Djeliba because they understand the language of animals. A turtle-dove speaks to them as they rest under a tree but the viewer does not find out what it says as only the initiated hunters can know. This scene further demonstrates the relationship between the Mande land and its people that verges on the mystical. The film implies that there are different levels of identification with Mande ethnicity and although Mabo will learn a part of Mande history from Djeliba, he will still need to walk across the land in order to be more connected to his ethnic identity. Knowing the history of the ethnic group is, in this case, just an introduction to the complex Mande world.

In addition to the connection with the land, Mande ethnicity in Keita is also expressed through the intricate web of the present and the past that form the narrative structure of the film. Valérie Thiers-Thiam describes Keita as ‘une
structure de récits enchâssés; l’histoire de Soundjata, située à un deuxième niveau de diégèse, devient un récit métadiégétique’ (2004: 135). Although Thiers-Thiam sketches a fairly accurate portrait of what the film’s narrative looks like on the first viewing, it does not describe the underlying representations of time. Firstly, there are two characters that appear to move from the mythical past into the present without any constraints, thus complicating the division of the film into self-contained ‘récits enchâssés’. The hunter of Do enters the film at the beginning, where he plants the idea of the storytelling mission into sleeping Djeliba’s head, and then shows up again in Djeliba’s story set at the court of the Mande king before reappearing to talk to Mabo at the end of the film. The second time-travelling character is Djeliba who claims to come from Wagadou, an ancient empire that has taken on ‘the allure of a myth of origin’ (Kesteloot 1989: 205-206). So, the sequence at the beginning of the film that shows Djeliba walking from his hut to Ougadougou may also be seen as a metaphorical representation of his travel from the roots of the Mali Empire to the present in order to report this history to the latest descendant of the first Mande king.

Thiers-Thiam’s outline of two separate narrative levels pre-empts a further exploration of the role of the two time-travelling characters who, in fact, carry the knowledge of Mande cultures inherited from their ancient ancestors. The hunter and the griot are two professions in the Mande world that can often go through an initiation into deeper knowledge of the Mande society (Herbert 1993: 176; Hale 2007: 172-184). They would have learned skills that have been practiced by Mande peoples for hundreds of years and their aim would be to pass these practices onto the next generation. Since they seem to transcend mortality in the film and move freely through time, we can assume that they are symbolic personifications of the persistence of Mande knowledge and lifestyle that continue to survive in modern times. The two narrative times in the film are linked together by these characters, so that the past informs the present and the present can pass the information into the future, continuing the evolution of Mande ethnic identities.

38 ‘A structure of embedded narratives; the story of Sundjata is located at a second level of diegesis, the narrative becomes metadiegetic’ (my translation)
Djeliba’s storytelling is a key part of the narrative structure in *Keita*, since storytelling is a medium through which the past can be channelled into the present. Although those sequences in *Keita* that are set in the past are clearly distinguishable, they are not as separate from the scenes set in the present as Thiers-Thiam makes them out to be. Naturally, the people in Djeliba’s story have period costumes and live in a village as opposed to the Keita family who wear casual clothing and have a house in the city. Nevertheless, the film’s narrative links the two visually distinct settings through Djeliba’s voiceover and Mabo’s questions, intertwining the two time settings. When Djeliba begins to tell the story, he describes a scene with a thirsty antelope and a hunter passing by while the camera is fixed in a close-up of his face (see Figure 1.3). The viewer still cannot see the images of the story set in the past, yet the story has begun already. It is only after Djeliba checks if Mabo is listening to the story that Djeliba describes the scene at the Mande king’s palace and the following shot transports the viewer into Djeliba’s story set in the past. In this shot, the viewer can see the previously mentioned hunter arriving at the king’s palace but the viewer can also hear Djeliba’s voiceover. The present in which Djeliba is telling the story and the past in which the story is happening are thus connected through Djeliba’s voice and the imagined and actual image of the hunter. In a time-image fashion, the present and the past combine and spill outside the image, calling upon the viewers’ imagination to create the image of past. This illustrates the way the Mande and other ethnic groups in West Africa can understand their past and ancestors as an undercurrent that remains significant in the present. Storytelling by a *griot*, both in this film and in reality, allows these time parallels to meet and the past surfaces entirely into the present. During these *griot* performances, West African audiences, like Mabo, are able to revive their identification with ancestors and ethnic groups.

Deleuze identifies storytelling as an essential element of African cinema, which he describes as ‘a cinema of the speech-act’ (1989: 222). For Deleuze, storytelling
forms a basis of ‘third cinema’ because it involves memory and ‘memory is invention of a people’ but these are not the people of the mythical past, rather they are ‘the people to come’ (1989: 223). Deleuze writes that the colonisers of the ‘third world’ have denied the history of existence to the peoples in their new colonies leading to a collective identity crisis. The role of storytelling in cinema, according to Deleuze, is to contribute to the re-invention of those people that have been missing in the dominant narratives of the colonial era (1989: 217). Deleuze’s comments on the ‘missing people’ remain relevant to this day, not only because ethnicity and ethnic groups have been ‘missing’ in the academic discourse on Francophone West African cinemas. Ethnic groups that have been ignored by colonial administration and divided by national borders can invent themselves through adapting their stories and storytelling art to cinema. West African ethnic groups have preserved their history and knowledge through oral cultures and by applying their orality in the cinematic medium, these groups are able to preserve their stories further, as well as tell new stories that reflect their changing lifestyles. The ending of *Keita* shows awareness of the crucial role of storytelling in representations of West African ethnic identities on screen. Upon his departure, Djeliba announces to Mabo and his parents:

Sais-tu pourquoi, dans les contes, le chasseur bat toujours le lion? Parce que c’est le chasseur qui les raconte. Si le lion rapporte ses contes, il gagnera parfois.

The lion’s story and the stories of the ‘missing people’ may not be a part of the canon in educational institutions or in libraries, but they are carried over to the next generation by the *griots*’ storytelling. The stories that do not fit the dominant narratives of nation but are more representative of ethnic identities are passed on verbally and now visually. Thus, *Keita* can be viewed as a statement by the

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39 ‘Third cinema’ is a term coined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and it concerns ‘the anti-imperialist struggle of the people of the Third World and of their equivalents inside the imperialist countries,’ or ‘the decolonization of culture’ (1970: 2)(original emphasis).

40 ‘Do you know why, in stories, the hunter always beats the lion? Because it is the hunter who tells the stories. If the lion reported his stories, he would win sometimes.’ (my translation)
filmmaker of his hopes for the continuing invention of the Mande peoples through the medium of film.

Nevertheless, Keita acknowledges that ethnic identity is just one form of identity and that some characters prioritize other aspects of their identities. Mabo’s mother, Sitan (Claire Sanon), seems to be the most wary of Djeliba’s presence in the house and particularly about his influence on Mabo. She does not value learning about one’s ancestry and ethnic origins because from her point of view, ethnic identity is less important than her urban middle class identity. To her, ethnic culture is something that she only engages in during social occasions. This is apparent in the scene where Sitan and her husband attend a wedding: the camera first shows a group of drummers and people dancing wildly to their beat, then we see Mr Keita in a lively conversation with the groom and his friends, and finally the camera pans across the crowd of spectators to reveal Sitan, who observes the proceedings with an expressionless face. All the women, apart from Sitan, look entertained but Sitan gets up to leave claiming she has a stranger in the house, to which he friend responds ‘and that stops you from celebrating a wedding?’ Not only does Sitan consider Djeliba a stranger, she also barely tolerates the traditional Mande wedding. Also, her intricately patterned, elegant green and red dress makes her stand out from the other women at the wedding who are mostly wearing plain, light-coloured dresses. Sitan’s dress and her expression reveal that she does not identify with displays of ethnic identity and that her ethnicity no longer forms a crucial part of her identity.

Instead of dwelling on her Mande ethnicity, Sitan has established herself as a modern woman comfortable in her urban environment. To Djeliba’s concern, she delegates cooking of the family’s food and cleaning the house to a girl servant. When she does perform household duties, she prefers to save her time and so she uses a brand new iron on her clothes and cooks spaghetti instead of local food. She displays the aspirational attitudes that reflect the urban middle class identity she has found her comfort in. Moreover, Sitan is a relatively equal partner to her husband and the camera demonstrates this fact by showing the couple while they
are both sitting in chairs, reading their newspapers. Each of them occupies one half of the frame and they are equal in height. When Mr Keita asks Sitan if she has seen his prayer mat, she is at first amused that Mr Keita even has a prayer mat and then tells him to go look for it himself. This is followed by a shot of Djeliba’s face looking disapprovingly at Sitan. This scene serves as a counterpoint to the film’s emphasis on ethnic identity because it not only highlights that Sitan’s identity is reflective of her lifestyle as an urban middle class woman, it also critiques Djeliba’s limited understanding of identity that extends beyond ethnicity. By showing that some characters, such as Sitan, identify themselves more closely with experiences outside of their ethnic cultures, Keita admits that ethnic identities, though significant, are not by far the sole form of identity representation in Francophone West African cinemas. The purpose of films like Keita and Guimba can be found in their drawing of wider attention to the continuing importance of ethnic identities but they do not offer an exhaustive representation of the complex networks of identities in Francophone West Africa. In the final section of this chapter, Guimba will be interpreted as a visual re-invention of the Mande people in the face of their underrepresentation in the dominant historical narrative of the region.

1.5 Re-inventing the Mande people in Guimba

In Guimba, ethnic identity and knowledge of clan history appear to be central to the narrative. The film begins as a story recited by a griot walking along a river, playing a string instrument. He talks about the ancient town of Sitakili, when it was ruled by a tyrant called Guimba Traoré (Fabola Issa Traoré) and his dwarf son Janguine (Lamine Diallo). Since childhood, Janguine and Kani (Mouneissa Maiga) have been betrothed in order to join the region’s two most powerful clans, but Janguine refuses to marry Kani and demands to be married to her mother Meya Diarra (Maimouna Hélène Diarra) instead. When Meya’s husband Mambi Keita (Balla Moussa Keita) protests, he is cast out of the town by Guimba, who now intends to marry Kani himself. Mambi finds help in a nearby hunters’ village but the master huntsman’s magic is not a match for Guimba’s dark powers gained through a pact with evil. In the end, it is a slave woman who, transformed by the hunters’
incantation, manages to seduce both Janguine and Guimba, causing the father to kill his son and lose his dark powers when exposed to sunlight. The **griot** concludes his story by claiming the town has since then been in good hands.

Unlike in *Keita*, the story in *Guimba* is set in a single time period and yet the film seems to transcend its temporal setting and comment on recent history while referring back to the mythical past. Guimba’s misuse of power and his reign of terror are a parallel of the dictatorial regime of Moussa Traoré, the president of Mali ousted during a coup in 1991. Like Guimba, Traoré has gained power through undemocratic means and he maintained control of the country by violent repression of all anti-government activities (Manning 1999: 198-199). When he was deposed from presidency, Traoré survived but he was condemned to death (BBC News 1999), much like Guimba who is left lying in the dust next to a newly made noose. *Guimba* is clearly modelled on the events of Traoré’s presidency but the film situates itself away from being a national allegory. Instead, the film explores said events in the ancient setting of the Mande Empire, ‘a supranational entity corresponding to a culture’ (Barlet 1996: 52). What Barlet implies here is that Sissoko is less interested in using the film to represent Malian national identity than in showing the longevity of culture and values of the Mande ethnicity. The connection drawn between Guimba and Traoré in the film intends to highlight the fact that ethnic identity remains a significant point of view through which current events can be interpreted.

Ethnic identity is also appealed to by the reliance of the narrative and character development in *Guimba* on the knowledge of clan histories of the Mande ethnic group. While an audience that is unaware of these clan relationships is provided with some clarification from Guimba’s personal *griot*, a Mande audience is more likely to identify the role of some of the characters. This is due to the fact that the characteristics of a person are assumed form their surname, so a Mande audience can therefore predict how characters will interact with each other based on their surnames. In *Guimba*, many of the actors are of the same surname as their characters on screen, so that they accurately represent the defining psychological
features associated with their clan name. The most notable example of a character fulfilling the role of their surname is when Guimba casts out Meya’s husband Mambi Keita, who carries the name of his ancestor Soundjata Keita. A Mande audience would be well-versed in the epic story of Soundjata Keita, the king of Mali empire. Soundjata was cast out of the Mande land when he had grown up but returned years later to defend the Mande land from the Traoré clan, who were Guimba’s ancestors. The history thus seems to be repeating itself when Mambi returns with the hunters as reinforcements to depose Guimba as town chief. By drawing on these specifically Mande aspects of characterisation in the story, the film emphasizes the significance of ethnic knowledge and clan history, which is so often recounted by griots at social events.

The parallel existence of the present and the past is due to the narrative structure based on a griot’s speech, and Guimba highlights this fact through its framing as well as through the griot character himself. The film is bookended by the same shot of a griot narrating the story of Guimba while walking along a river. As the griot begins his story, the camera moves to look into the river and the shot dissolves into the next, now set in the past. The present and the past meet, ‘distorting spatio-temporal continuity’ (Thackway 2006: 64) through the griot’s speech which has now become the film’s story. This distortion continues to manifest itself throughout the film, namely by the frequent cutting away to whatever is happening to different characters or in other parts of town. The editing seems to follow the griot’s pattern of speech, whereby a story is composed of several character storylines, and the narration weaves through them to maintain the listeners’ attention. Moreover, another griot within the film consistently brings the past into the foreground, in the form of recounting family histories at every opportunity he gets. In that sense, the past is always a part of the present and the

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41 However, this fact can also be viewed as the film’s representation of Mande clan characteristics, as imagined by the director. As Deleuze’s understanding of representation shows, the director’s interpretation of clan characteristics can be seen as his intervention into the reality of clan stereotypes. This specific example highlights the tension between the representational and non-representational aspects of the films.

42 Peter Hitchcock claims that Guimba ‘consistently explores cinematic language as a way to connect the past more forcefully to the present’ (2010: 278).
family ancestors who may not be visible on the screen are nevertheless present via the griot’s speech. By inviting the past into the present, both through framing of the story and its characters, the film encourages reflection on the present state of the ethnic community, in the same way that a griot’s story encourages reflecting on one’s own kinship identity.

Additionally, there is no indication of any specific historical time in which Guimba is set, thus making it easier to relate to both the story and how it represents ethnic identities. The beginning of the film, which features the griot about to narrate the story, does not give any clues as to the temporal location of this griot, and neither does the griot inform the audience about the historical setting of his story. This often happens in African mythology, Okpewho argues,

> because in the scheme of experiences that [the griot] narrates there are no rigid time boundaries. The present society may seem to be turning their backs on the ideals that sustained men of a bygone era. But the ideals are still within reach (...) and what is more, the physical as well as cultural setting within which they can be realized may still be present. (1983: 105)

Minimizing the gap between the past and the present means that the moral of the griot’s story translates much more easily to contemporary West African audiences and brings them closer to identifying with what could have been their ancestors in the story. As Okpewho also points out, the ‘cultural setting’ presented in the griot’s story may not have vanished from contemporary West African societies. In other words, the representations of ethnic identity that Guimba provides may still be familiar to contemporary audiences, thus encouraging audience identification along the lines of ethnicity.

43 Hence the significance of surnames being mentioned in the film; West African audiences are able to find their lineage mentioned in the film and thus see where their family figures within the story and the community depicted on screen.
Guimba prioritises the ethnic community of the Bambara over the Malian national community, even though the film’s story is effectively an allegory of the dictatorship of a former Malian president. Sissoko is aware that within the discourse about national identity there are other, minor identities which have also been affected by similar or even the same events but have never been given an opportunity to recount their experiences. The lack of representation of ethnic identities constitutes a problem Deleuze may have been perceptive to, when in Cinema 2 he stated:

Third world and minorities gave rise to authors who would be in a position, in relation to their nation and their personal situation in that nation, to say: the people are what is missing. (1989: 217)

Deleuze implies that nations, particularly in the ‘third world’, contain heterogeneous minor communities whose people are ‘missing’ from the national discourse, and they are only ‘written-in’ once an author/artist is able to represent them. Hence also the significant use of griots and griots’ speech in Guimba, since griots are authors/artists that provide representation to their ethnic group through their storytelling. Furthermore, Deleuze also proclaims that from the moment they are denied existence, the missing people ‘are a becoming, they invent themselves’ (1989: 217). Guimba stands for this invention of an ethnic community because it responds to a period of time when filmmaking in this region was interpreted as a means of nation-building, of representing a national identity. It invents the Bambara people in the face of their erasure by the concept of Malian nationality, and it becomes a part of the Bambara ethnic identity, fulfilling Hall’s words about the process of representation.

One group that embodies the relevance of ethnic identities represented in Guimba is the hunters. They are included in the narrative of both Keita and Guimba because theirs is a symbolism rich in mythological and historical connections to the Mali Empire (Leach 2004: viii) and thus to the roots of Mande ethnic identities. As

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44 The Bambara are one of several branches of the Mande peoples.
an actual group in West Africa today, the hunters represent non-national forms of identity, such as ethnicity (Leach 2004: xiii), as well as providing guidance to socioecological and moral relations (Leach 2004: viii). Their inclusion in the narrative of Guimba, led by hunter Siriman (Cheick Oumar Maiga), therefore further signifies the film’s moving away from the concept of national identity. In the film, the hunters’ existence outside national and administrative units is referred to through the use of location. They reside in the mountains outside of Sitakili, so they are beyond Guimba’s constituency, and their dwellings are part of the landscape rather than an actual village settlement. Territory and borders do not matter to the hunters according to Leach (2004: viii), all they are interested in is achieving justice and well-being for those they live amongst. Since the hunters do not seem to be territorial, they do not send an army to conquer Guimba’s town; instead they choose Siriman to try to negotiate Guimba’s capitulation. So, despite having an attachment to the landscape itself, which is characteristic of ethnic identities, the hunters do not display the need to defend their territory or conquer others, thus arguably failing the attribute of nationality.

Even though Guimba does not promote territoriality, the film nevertheless relies heavily on the symbolism of landscape and architecture in its representation of ethnic identity. The film, though set in a fictional town called Sitakili, is filmed in Djenné (Roy 2006: 134), one of the oldest towns in sub-Saharan Africa and a cradle of the region’s pre-Islamic civilization (UNESCO no date). The location therefore
holds a major historical and cultural value for members of numerous ethnic groups that have resided in the town throughout the ages. The instinct when filming an epic story set in such a historically significant town would be, quite understandably, to include as many establishing long shots of the architecture as possible. However, *Guimba* does not go down that road, instead focusing on the action in the scenes while allowing some tantalizing glimpses of the location’s architecture (see Figure 3). While this approach may not satisfy those looking for a picturesque imagery of ‘Africa’, it fulfils a function of spatial representation that is mindful of the town’s ethnic groups. This focus on action within the walls of Djenné means that rather than remaining a spectacular backdrop, the town comes alive on screen through the characters using its spaces, illustrating what life could have looked like for the town’s inhabitants a long time ago. Showing the town this way is a meaningful gesture towards those ethnic groups that have resided in the town and are represented in the story on screen. It acknowledges the fact that the town has been shaped by individuals of differing ethnicities rather than homogenous civilizations. The film thus pays homage to those residents, their respective ethnic groups and the town that remains central to their histories.

Furthermore, *Guimba*’s setting also represents the magical and occult powers which several of the Mande ethnic groups believe in. The film contains a number of demonstrations of magical powers used by both Guimba and Siriman. All of these powers are man-controlled strikes of a natural phenomenon: lightning, eclipse, dust devils, etc. In *Guimba*, magic is not a supernatural intervention; it comes from the earth or the sky as and when needed by those who can wield it. Thackway calls it ‘a logical part of the socio-cultural environment of the films’ setting’ (2006: 91). The reason why so much occult power manifests itself in the film is its setting in Djenné, which, as Roderick J. McIntosh explains, is recognized by all Mande people as a seat of immense occult presence. Guimba’s genius is to pervert the social power harvested from this place, perverting what should be the Mande Hero’s role to bend

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45 For example, the Great Mosque in Djenné is renovated every year by its citizens who volunteer to mix the mud paste and climb the mosque’s walls to apply it (Gharib 2015).
McIntosh posits that the power of the Mande belief in the occult presence in the town is what materializes in the film as magic. If that is so, then the fact that *Guimba* shows these magical manifestations as natural phenomena can be seen as an affirmation of the power of the Mande belief. In other words, the strength of this belief is deemed relevant by the film thus making the belief appear justified. Since the belief is rooted in Mande ethnic identities, then it can be said that through its depiction of magic, the film also gives credit to the strength of ethnic identities of the Mande people.

On a final note, *Guimba*, like other films set in the precolonial era, faces an ongoing questioning about the intentions behind its approach to representation of West Africa, its history, and its ethnically diverse peoples. Murphy and Patrick Williams summarize these questions as a dilemma between ‘allowing access to the reality of Africa’ and ‘pander[ing] to Western desires’ for stereotypical images of Africa (2007: 10). While this questioning of representational practice has its value, it nevertheless appears to be preoccupied with the concept of ‘reality’, especially ‘reality’ from the perspective of the postcolonial West looking at representations of the Other. Rather than leaning towards one of the two, or combination of both, options listed by Murphy and Williams, I suggest *Guimba’s* representational politics can be interpreted through its use of the *powers of the false* as a tool for negotiating contemporary ethnic identities. The desire for ‘reality’ is a desire for truth, and truth, writes Deleuze, ‘is always that of the masters or colonizers’ (1989: 150). What *Guimba* does with its framing as a *griot’s* story and blurring of boundaries between the present and the past is not attempting to tell the truth about ‘the reality of Africa’; it is using ‘the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster’ (Deleuze 1989: 150).

The film reveals not only the *griot* but also Sissoko himself, ‘when he enters into “the flagrant offence of making up legends” and so contributes to the invention of his people’ (Deleuze 1989: 150). Therefore, *Guimba* does not represent the reality;
it gives narrative space to those ‘missing people’ that have been eradicated from representation by colonialism and Western cultural imperialism. The film ‘invents people’ and contributes to the invention of people by visualising their legends. This lenient attitude towards representation of the pre-colonial era is not unusual in African societies, as Mbembe notes:

contemporary African cultural formations have not emerged out of people’s experiencing of the past as a fate set in stone; rather, they often derive from an ability to treat the past both as open-ended and as an interlude – a negotiation of those aspects or fragments of the past necessary for life to go on in the present. (2002: 636-7)

Both Mbembe’s and Deleuze’s lines of argument work in support of the notion that rather than aiming to represent ‘the reality of Africa’, these films focus on the rehabilitation of ethnic myths and histories through their non-linear depiction of time. The past is, as Mbembe writes, an open-ended and negotiable resource for those in the present because its revival is a crucial tool for the evolution and representation of ethnic identities. Not only do the above films visualise the ‘missing people’ of the past that have been mis- or underrepresented, they also make sure that these myths and ethnic histories represent ethnic identities and their continuing significance in contemporary Francophone West Africa.

In conclusion, ethnic identities remain an important form of belonging in the Francophone West African region and films like *Keita* and *Guimba* represent these identities on screen. In this chapter, I have applied some of the tools normally used in analysis of national identities in European cinema, in order to conceptualize the ways ethnic identities can be represented in Francophone West African cinemas. The two most important themes associated with cinematic representations of national identity, spatial and time settings, also transpired to have meaningful symbolism for West African ethnic identities. In particular, the incorporation of the mythical past into the present in both *Keita* and *Guimba* shows that the manipulation of narrative temporality is one of the most significant ways Francophone West African filmmakers convey a specifically ethnic understanding of
time. This portrayal of time as spilling over from the past into the present and the future, and described by Deleuze as time-image, is deeply indebted to the storytelling cultures cultivated by most ethnic groups in the region. By applying these indigenous storytelling techniques to the film medium, Francophone West African filmmakers take on the mission of the griots and their listeners to sustain the culture and stories that are otherwise erased from the dominant discourse on Francophone West Africa. Keita and Guimba, along with a number of other films, challenge the lack of Western awareness of West African ethnic identities and contribute to a wider representation of West African ethnic identities in cinema.

However, representations of ethnic identity on screen cannot be considered without further analysis of other forms of identity and outside influences that shape and are being shaped by ethnic identities. Especially given that the past and ancestry have been identified as important comments on ethnic identities, it is necessary to investigate the representations of identities that are also closely linked with ancestry. An analysis of the depictions of kinship identities would extend our understanding of the relationship of the past and the present, due to the correlation of kinship and social status in Francophone West African films. The next chapter will therefore focus on how kinship and social status are negotiated in three Francophone West African films and what these representations of kinship identities further reveal about West African ethnic identities on film.
Chapter Two

Representations of Kinship, Caste and Class Identities

Negotiation of social status within strict social hierarchies has always been a theme close to the heart of many Francophone West African filmmakers. It is a strong thread that runs through the films of Ousmane Sembène (Borom Sarret [1963], Xala [1975] and Faat Kiné [2000]), but also Djibril Diop Mambéty (Touki Bouki [1973], La Petit Vendeuse de Soleil [1999]), Idrissa Ouedraogo (Kini et Adams [1997]), and Abderrahmane Sissako (Bamako [2006]) to name a few. These films reflect the need of the filmmakers to represent and publicize the various issues faced by modern West Africans on a daily basis. In most of these films, the social issues such as corruption, bribery, income inequality, or access to education are approached through an individual’s story, in order to illustrate the personal effect of a wide-spread problem. However, the specific issues that are affecting a character on screen can command most of the attention, leaving no space for a conversation about the social structures and power hierarchies that appear to be the backbone of such issues. Consequently, representations of societal status and the identity it sustains is not a commonly debated topic in discussions about contemporary Francophone West African cinemas. In this chapter, I am going to look at the reasons why societal status and power hierarchies need more attention as themes in Francophone West African cinemas and how these themes can be analysed.

This chapter will begin with a brief survey of the position of African film studies regarding the study of representations of societal status and social hierarchies in Francophone West African cinemas. Following this, the chapter will look at the connection between societal status and ethnic identity, showing that these two forms of identity operate interdependently. This is due to the fact that societal
status is partly determined by kinship and caste, both of which are often tightly joined with ethnic group history. The other concept that affects societal status and that introduces another type of social hierarchy to the equation is class. Class not only complicates the hierarchies established within and across ethnic groups, it has been a major factor in widening the urban/rural divide in the region. The chapter will then demonstrate how this division has translated into African film studies research as the problematic concept of tradition versus modernity. The next section of the chapter will look closely at the following three films: *Faro: La Reine des Eaux* (Salif Traoré, 2007), *Delwende* (S. Pierre Yameogo, 2005) and *Aujourd’hui* (Alain Gomis, 2013). My analysis of each of these films will study how the films’ protagonists negotiate their societal status in their respective environments and how their struggles reveal the flaws of the social hierarchies they have to navigate. Among others, these issues will include excessive reliance on social order, subjective notions of morality as well as overlooking the needs of young people. As a result, this chapter will highlight how representations of societal status are a subtle yet important theme in contemporary Francophone West African cinemas.

Before proceeding to survey the portrayals of social hierarchies in Francophone West African cinemas, it ought to be noted that in terms of theory, this chapter relies considerably less on Deleuze’s work. This is due to the fact that the chapter’s focus lies in the clarification of the different types of social hierarchies that have impact on kinship identities and their representation on film. The theoretical emphasis therefore has to shift from Deleuze towards discussions of kinship, caste and class advancing in the fields of ethnography, cultural studies and political science. Nevertheless, one of the films analysed in this chapter, *Aujourd’hui*, offers some scope for discussion about how its depiction of space relates to Deleuze’s theory of identity and difference, and the concept of ‘becoming’. *Aujourd’hui* traces its protagonist’s life within the space of one day, highlighting the way ‘becoming’ and kinship processes influence the character’s journey through life/day. The concept of ‘becoming’ is then going to be explored in more detail in the following
two chapters, while this chapter continues its focus on the representation of kinship identities and social hierarchies.

2.1 Cinematic representation of social hierarchies

Since the initial films in the early years of post-independence, West African filmmakers have been attempting to visually and thematically represent the workings, and particularly the flaws, of established and emerging social hierarchies. Diawara notes that the early films of Ousmane Sembène and Souleymane Cissé ‘enfold in their narratives the discourse of dignity, self-reliance and the failure of African governments to uphold these values’ (Diawara in Givanni 2001: 83). It is therefore not surprising that both filmmakers, as well as others at the time, have embraced social realism because it allowed them to express their narrative themes in an equivalent style. Social realism is also a style befitting the period of political and economic upheaval which the newly independent African countries were going through in the 1960s and 1970s. Political historian Dickson Eyoh notes that ‘a greater sensitivity to the cultural and symbolic dimensions of political power enables social realist cinema to avoid (...) reduc[ing] political power to material (class) relations’ (1998: 113). Representation of political power and its failings has remained a strong motif in Francophone West African cinemas, even if social realism has been overtaken by other filmmaking styles. However, as Armes suggests, even with the possibilities for formal experimentation due to the availability of French/European funding,

there has been a continuation of the kind of realist filmmaking chronicling the problems of post-independence societies which has been characteristic of African filmmaking since its origins. (2006: 149)

As filmmakers display a continuing interest in representing the social and political issues in the region, it is impossible to ignore the themes of societal status and social hierarchy, which often emerge in the background of such films. The reoccurrence of these themes justifies a more comprehensive investigation into how they are represented within film narrative as well as visually.
Yet, the discussion in the field of African film studies is presently about whether the current theoretical structure of the field is too focused on the social and political elements of the films, to the detriment of the films’ stylistic and/or genre aspects. One of the latest proponents of change is Alexie Tcheuyap, who wrote *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (2011) to specifically counter the lack of attention paid to the genres of African cinema, its aesthetic concerns and new modes of representation of African identities (2011: 27). Tcheuyap’s main argument lies in the assertion that the films coming out of contemporary Africa are less concerned with nation building and social issues than scholars make them out to be. While it is certainly true that nation building is no longer the main focus of African cinema (Armes 2006: 145), it would be naïve to reject West African filmmakers’ sensitivity to local social and political issues. Tcheuyap is right in highlighting the increasing variety in genres and styles in African cinemas and he is right to criticize the often restrictive focus on nationality and postcolonial identity. At the same time, rejecting social and political readings of films can definitely harm the inclusivity of ‘the renewal of African film criticism that is the core objective of [Tcheuyap’s] book’ (2011: 27). In fact, Tcheuyap seems to be unable to entirely escape the undertone of social issues present in some of the films he analyses, particularly in his chapter on witchcraft and the absence of centralized power hierarchies. In this chapter, Tcheuyap touches on how the issues with indigenous power structures are represented on screen but he shies away from discussing the topic further as it does not fit in with his apolitical stance on representation. Nevertheless, he draws attention to the lack of balance of research, by pointing out the fixation of the field on national identities and postcolonial theory.

Still, even those scholars in African film studies who do write about the social and political aspects of West African cinema do not mention the indigenous power structures in much detail. Neither Thackway nor Josef Gugler mention kinship, class or caste as a theme in their two volumes on African cinema. Barlet fleetingly remarks in his analysis of Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* (1987) on a ‘privileged caste’ (2000: 91) from which knowledge and power must be taken away. Avoiding the
topic of caste and kinship is likely to be linked with the reluctance to discuss ethnicity which I identified in the previous chapter. However, even Diawara, who promotes the study of ethnicity in West African cinema, prefers to turn his attention to wider political issues instead of local flawed power structures (in Givanni 2001: 83-84). It seems that these authors are ‘zooming out’ in order to identify larger political problems but they neglect to consider that the films represent the specific social hierarchies that are often enabled by wider political problems. It also means that a well-rounded discussion of representations of class/kinship and their role in social hierarchies is missing, thus creating a gap in knowledge which is considered significant in other cinemas.46 This lack of focus on individual experiences within flawed indigenous power structures indicates that these scholars and others in African film studies are not exhaustive in their scrutiny of African identities on screen.

2.2 Societal status and ethnic identities: relevance of caste and kinship in contemporary West Africa

Any discussion of societal status and power hierarchies in West Africa must mention how closely these two concepts are linked with ethnicity and ethnic identity. The previous chapter has established that ethnicity in West Africa transcends the national borders of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, the three countries selected for this analysis. The chapter has also found that some Francophone West African film productions can be interpreted as representations of ethnic identity. The significance of ethnicity is also reflected, as I will go on to argue, in the continuing relevance of the customary power structures within and across West African ethnic groups.47 Through history, West African ethnic groups have developed varying degrees of social stratification. Tal Tamari has found that

46 For examples, see Tomaselli on class in South African cinema (2014), Benshoff and Griffin on class in American cinema (2011) or an edited volume on the significance of class in a number of other cinemas by Berg and James (1996).
47 For instance, in Mande ethnic groups, societal status is determined by a family member’s position within their clan, and the clan’s position within the clan hierarchy of the ethnic group. As Africanist Jan Jansen clarifies, ‘Mande rule was over people and not over land, and therefore status claims were in terms of social relations’ (1996: 660). Therefore, if ethnicity remains a significant form of identity, so does the societal status defined by ethnic power structures.
most West African ethnic groups (including the Mande and the Wolof) that have incorporated a caste system⁴⁸ share the division into three social categories, including the nobles, the craftsmen and the slaves (1991: 223). Although the categories have been subject to change since their first use, they have not lost relevance to the modern societies in West Africa. Barbara G. Hoffman spent time in Mali training to be a jelimumu (a female member of the Mande craftsmen caste) and explains in her book that the traditional caste divisions of the Mande ethnic groups are still relevant in modern Mali. The caste system can be manifest in many domains of social interaction, not as rules that determine behaviour, but as principles and strategies that are available as justification for action. (2000: 234)

Since the Mande rely on the caste system to navigate their daily social interactions, Mande ethnic identities are almost inseparable from the caste system.⁴⁹ Being a member of an ethnic group therefore means that one must occupy a position within its caste system. Yet, such a position is not fixed and individuals have agency in their behaviours and relations, so much so that they can chose to entirely ignore caste in their lives (Hoffman 2000: 234; Conrad and Frank 1995: 15). Still, a family or a clan associated with a certain caste level strongly influences its members standing in society.⁵⁰

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⁴⁸ Tamari suggests the term ‘caste’ as a suitable definition of the social order in over fifteen West African ethnic groups (1991: 221) but she meets with resistance from anthropologists Roy M. Dilley (2000) and David C. Conrad and Barbara Frank (1995), who all point to the fact that the term was introduced to West Africa by the colonial administration wishing to take advantage of the existing power hierarchies. On the other hand, ‘class’, due to its association with industrialized countries, has not yet proved to be a fitting concept for the West African social order. In the article Class, State and Hegemony in Africa (1988), Robert Fatton Jr. argues, although in a somehow generalist language, that ruling classes have yet to come into existence in Africa, as does a unified working class. In an even earlier article for The Socialist Register (1972), Robin Cohen arrives at a similar conclusion to Fatton Jr.’s, citing ‘the continuing expression and organisation of political life around ethnic categories’ (1972: 253) as reason for the lack of social classes in Africa.

⁴⁹ In fact, Roy M. Dilley proposes that some castes, such as the Tukulor craftsmen of the Fula peoples in Senegal, could be referred to as a semi-ethnic group in themselves because they have a shared sense of identity (2000: 159).

⁵⁰ The Mande people find out the caste and clan associations of each other through their jamu, an equivalent to a surname, because it evokes one’s ancestors and their relationships with bearers of
Kinship can therefore be among the major determinants of a person’s societal status in West Africa (Rashid 2006: 119, Jansen 2008: 259). More than that, kinship ties can determine people’s quality of life and survival during sickness and bad economic times (Alber, Häberlein and Martin 2010: 44). Families and clans often maintain their rank in the caste system by providing social and financial solidarity to their relatives in need. However, as some clans acquire far more power and privilege than others, the power hierarchy based on kinship reveals a side of social inequality (Rashid 2006: 139). For example, the Keita lineage in the Mandinka ethnic group had been established as ‘noble’ during the Mali empire, so the members of the lineage are automatically considered for leadership positions inside as well as outside their ethnic group (McNaughton 1988: 2). In other words, kinship, like other types of social hierarchy, is a rigid system that encourages the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a small selected group of people. The flip side of the kinship social hierarchy is apparent when those who belong to a minor lineage or happen to be related to somebody accused of a crime or of witchcraft will see their societal status diminishing. Even within the relatively fortunate lineages conflicts can arise, leading to splitting up of families (Jansen 1996: 661) or worse still, family members being cast out by more powerful family members.\textsuperscript{51} The films analysed in this chapter are structured around kinship. They represent the ways in which it is possible to benefit from kinship but also how individuals and whole villages have to negotiate the many disadvantages of this social hierarchy.

One of the flaws of the kinship system is also the fact that it enables a power structure that discriminates on the basis of age. Age and societal status are strongly correlated among West African ethnic groups. Rashid explains that senior members of ethnic groups in West Africa have ‘acquired certain decision-making powers,

\textsuperscript{different} \textit{jamu}. The relationship between ancestors then defines the type of social interaction their descendants can have between themselves.\textsuperscript{51} Accounts of this are found in oral histories and songs of Mande ethnic groups (Charry 2000: 154). Though these resources may be ultimately considered fictional, they provide an insight into the moral principles of kinship represented in such stories.
including control of group resources, \(^{52}\) organization of work, ritual and religious processes, and marriage arrangements’ (2006: 119). This means that there is a definite lack of power in the hands of young people. According to Donal B. Cruise O’Brien, young people in contemporary Francophone West Africa struggle to promote their political and social interests due to their limited resources and frequently also manipulation by their elders(1996: 56). \(^{53}\) Since politics is seen as a matter of power and responsibility, young people are kept out of government by senior politicians from established lineages. It means that the concerns of younger people are rarely heard and in turn, young people have given up on participation in elections.\(^{54}\) The result is a deeply inflexible top layer of the social hierarchy that maintains the often deeply unequal status quo and views any attempts at widening access to power and resources with suspicion. Understandably, this is one of the burning issues that filmmakers in Francophone West Africa continue to draw attention to. In particular, the first two films in this chapter address the problem of distribution of power in the kinship social hierarchy and how it occurs mainly along the lines of age and gender.

Women are in an especially precarious position within some kinship social hierarchies, because they face a constant possibility of losing their livelihoods based on an accusation of witchcraft. The Mossi ethnic group (represented in *Delwende*) has an extremely negative attitude towards witchcraft (Skinner 1989: 91), while the Mande ethnic groups (represented in *Faro*) perceive its positive or negative value depending on the context (McNaughton 1988: 11). Moore and Sanders explain that

\(^{52}\) Jeffrey Herbst suggests that there can be a lot of tension between ethnic rulers (chiefs) and the state representatives in West Africa due to the division in resource control (2011: 175), thus widening the already substantial urban/rural divide.

\(^{53}\) Although O’Brien’s comments are more oriented towards political power, his findings are emblematic of the elders’ preferential treatment and favourable position within social hierarchies in West Africa.

\(^{54}\) Research into youth participation in elections in Africa reveals that young people and women are perceived as being unable to hold positions of leadership. Young people are also put off politics by the lack of platforms for their engagement, as well as a biased imposition of age restrictions on running for office (Mandela Institute for Development Studies 2016: 83). In Senegal, the disengagement and low election turnout among young people has led to the establishment of the Y’en a Marre movement, whereby a group of musicians has led a youth voter registration drive to oust the former president from power (Binet 2012).
‘witchcraft is perhaps best understood as a matter of social diagnostics rather than belief’ (2004: 4). Even though witchcraft remains a wide-spread phenomenon in Africa, accusations of witchcraft appear to be dependent on the current social/political/economic situation of the specific area that is perceived to be affected by it. In her research on witchcraft refugees in Africa, human rights scholar Jill Schnoebelen notes that witchcraft accusations have been explained as a consequence of rapid cultural or social change. (…) Events like ecological changes, natural catastrophes, wars, and internal conflicts contribute to sociocultural distortion that leads to cultural disorganization. At this stage, ‘witchcraft’, ‘communist plots’ and the like are viable explanations of misfortune (especially in situations where traditional coping mechanisms have been lost or rendered ineffective). (2009: 4)

Schnoebelen’s last point is significant because it can be read as a case of blaming vulnerable individuals for a misfortune which local chiefs have failed to or have not been able to prevent. In that sense, witchcraft is a tool that those in the higher levels of a power structure can use to avoid responsibility and a possible loss of power, as shown in Delwende.

There is clearly a gender divide in accusations of witchcraft as both males and females can be accused, but female witches are more likely to be seen in a negative light. African historian Ralph A. Austen explains that there exists a distinction between female witches, who are totally stigmatised, and males who are recognized as both witches and legitimate figures of both political and ritual authority. (…) [The distinction] is the public (original emphasis) positions held by the men in question that makes their witchcraft somehow more tolerable and even, in some cases, celebrated. (1993: 91)

Witchcraft accusations therefore serve a function of keeping women out of power, for the fear of losing their livelihoods. In the absence of assistance from the state due to the lack of local governance, women accused of witchcraft have no safety
net and end up in absolute poverty or as refugees. Delwende illustrates this major disadvantage for women in the kinship social hierarchy and it can be read as a subtle criticism of the power structure that allows witchcraft accusations to impact so harshly on female lives. It is important that the film and others like it are interpreted as critical commentaries on the flawed power structures in Francophone West Africa. Delwende’s significance also lies in the fact that it does not ascribe the fear of witchcraft solely to rural areas, thus challenging the concept of the urban/rural divide.

2.3 Class and the urban/rural divide

Before turning to the examination of class and the urban/rural divide, it ought to be mentioned that class and kinship in Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso operate on similar principles. One of the reasons for the compatibility of the emerging class system and the kinship-based hierarchy is that both systems emphasize the crucial role of connections. In the higher echelons of the class system, one’s status very much relies on the network of acquaintances that help solidify and improve one’s standing in that particular level of society. Dennis Galvan notes that in Senegal, ‘people conduct business, join political movements, and form social alliances by invoking metaphors of kinship’ (2001; 57).

Many families in West Africa rely on their ancestors’ great deeds to gain access to resources and also on the success of the current members of the clan for spreading their influence and securing a good position within society. The importance of connections in the kinship system is an aspect of social hierarchy consistent with the practicalities of class.

Yet, some difference is recognized between the type of societal status acquired by membership of a class and one that has been inherited through kinship. Rashid distinguishes kinship as ‘a cultural framework for the construction of identity and citizenship’ whereas ‘class offers the opportunity to capture the status of people (...) in the process of acquisition and distribution of economic resources and political power’ (2006: 118). He sees kinship as providing reputation or prestige

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based on a family’s standing in the society (defined by the successes of its ancestors), regardless of the financial wealth this family may have. Indeed, Conrad points out that members of families from prominent lineages often retain positions of political and economic authority (2006: 92), thus bridging the gap between kinship and class. Still, Rashid’s definition suggests that kinship is the more formative structure of societal status in West Africa. It seems that due to kinship’s reliance on history and ancestry, it offers a more stable framework for identity formation compared to class, which depends on the arguably more volatile economic situation in the region.

The social hierarchies in West Africa are stratified along the lines of kinship, caste and increasingly also class. In an article for the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (1973), Szymon Chodak describes how the French colonial system and later the formation of independent governments affected and contributed to the creation of a class system in Francophone West African societies. Chodak proposes that the established indigenous social order had been diluted because ‘the indigenous population (…) as a whole now became the lower caste’ subordinated to the colonisers and their middle men (1973: 408). This system later diversified even more with the introduction of profit-oriented economy (1973: 409) and resulted in a social hierarchy that combines elements of kinship/caste stratification as well as the class structure encouraged by capitalism. Although Chodak offers a detailed schema of the current social strata and their problematic differentiation, his study often suffers from an oversimplification of the continent’s ethnic and social diversity.56 Furthermore, as Chodak wrote the study in the early 1970s, his insights are limited to the class structure that has developed up until that point in time. Nation-specific research reveals that both Mali and Senegal have at their top an emergent powerful bureaucratic social class, which does not yet own the means of production in Mali (Mefflassoux 1970: 107-8), but has control over commercial activity in Senegal (Boone 1990: 43). Little has been published on the current class

56 Kenneth Little’s study also looks at West Africa without distinction of ethnicity or nationality, and outlines 3-4 social classes: the political/military/business class, educational/clergy/medical class, clerical/artisanal class and manual labourers (1974: 44).
structure in Burkina Faso, suggesting that the topic of class in these three countries has been somewhat underrepresented.

Despite its lack of regional specificity, Chodak’s study touches on a crucial point regarding the perceived division in social and cultural values between urban and rural areas. In a pyramid diagram of the social stratification in African countries at the time, Chodak demonstrates the ambiguous division between status groups in rural areas and those in urban areas (1973: 412). Excluding the top of the pyramid occupied by the ruling elite and political bureaucracy, and the bottom belonging to the majority of the rural population, the middle section of the diagram shows an amalgamation of groups residing in both rural and urban areas. The chiefs, rural entrepreneurs and peasants are on a par with urban entrepreneurs and working class, with some chiefs even reaching the levels of political bureaucracy.

Additionally, Chodak also comments on the fact that the ruling elite in most African countries derives its power from their own ‘tribes’ and kin groups, thus defying the urban/rural divide and creating a vertical division of power instead (1973: 412). This vertical division of power along the lines of ethnicity, kinship and lineage has also been described by Rashid, Conrad and Frank. However, this is where Chodak’s lack of attention to regional and ethnic diversity creates a problem with his proposed bridging of the urban/rural divide. Mahmood Mamdani postulates that after independence African states either became conservative and supported indigenous social hierarchies (decentralised power) or they became radical and

57 In the 1970s and 1980s, there has clearly been an academic debate whether such a thing as class system has or can develop in West African countries. Mary Crawford Young argues that class system has developed to some extent (1986: 422) but admits that it must be studied on a regional level (1986: 473), since it differs among the African states. Contrary to Crawford Young’s hesitation to admit emerging class structures in Africa, Frantz Fanon appears very sure about the existence of a ‘national middle class’ in the postcolonial ‘under-developed countries’ (1963: 119).

58 This argument about the mutual relationship between political power and ethnicity is later explored by Crawford Young, who argues that in the postcolonial state, politics shaped ethnic consciousness. Crawford Young concludes that ‘domination’ over resources has become central to African politics and thus drove ethnic mobilization and conflict (1986: 447). However, he does not explain why Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso have not descended into ethnic conflict, which seems to be the inevitable conclusion of her argument. Blanton, Mason and Athow propose that ethnic conflict on the continent is tied closely to the colonial styles (2001). Unlike the British, the French colonial administration left behind ‘a centralised bureaucratic power structure that impeded ethnic mobilization’ (2001: 473). All three countries are now undergoing/ have undergone the process of decentralisation.
devized a countrywide hierarchy of power (centralised power) (1996: 25). This meant that

the decentralised conservative variant of despotism tended to bridge the urban-rural divide through a clientelism whose effect was to exacerbate ethnic divisions, [whereas] its centralised radical variant (...) de-emphasiz(ed) the customary and ethnic difference between rural areas while deepening the chasm between town and country. (1996: 26)

The division between urban and rural areas, in terms of social stratification and the social values it entails is therefore not as straightforward as imagined by the proponents of the tradition/modernity motif in African film studies. A closer look at how social hierarchies in urban and rural areas are represented in cinema can potentially inform a more in-depth debate on the tradition/modernity motif.

The concept of urban/rural division translated from political and social sciences into other areas of African studies. In the field of film studies, the concept has been articulated as the tradition/modernity dichotomy and widely debated by Diawara (1992), Barlet (2000), Murphy (2000) and Akudinobi (2014), among others. The tradition/modernity dichotomy is seen as a major theme in contemporary Francophone West African cinemas and it introduces a hierarchical relationship between what is seen as modern (Westernized) and what is seen as traditional and ‘authentically’ African. The two styles clash and purportedly reveal ‘the infinite possibilities simultaneously existing in both tradition and modernity’ (Bakari 2000: 13). Kenneth Harrow, however, sees the tradition/modernity dichotomy as nothing more than ‘the project of modernism moulded by colonial notions of European civilisation’ (1999: xv). From the above discussions, it transpires that it is impossible to separate the concept of tradition from the concept of modernity, yet the motif still seems to generate interest in the field of African film studies. One of the intriguing characteristics of this problem is its use of the word ‘tradition’, instead of the accurate antonym ‘ancient’, as Akudinobi points out (2014: 48). Focusing on the implications of the use of ‘tradition’ in this motif might provide a better understanding of the continuing demand for this concept.
Akudinobi gestures towards the work of anthropologist Corinne Ann Kratz, who explores the notion of ‘tradition’ as an evolving indigenous cultural concept (1993). Kratz posits that most scholars in English-speaking academia have a culturally-formed understanding of what ‘tradition’ means59 but fail to consider that the term takes on different meanings in different cultures (1993: 32-36). Thus, without investigating aspects of identity and history of a set of people, it is not possible to comprehend how they conceptualize ‘tradition’. Based on the analysis of the representations of Mande identities and their relationship with temporality in the previous chapter, it can be assumed that Kratz’s reasoning applies in the case of the Mande peoples too. In the preceding chapter, I noted that representations of Mande ethnic identity often rely on a non-linear conception of time; the past interrupts and coexists with the present. If time is not perceived as linear by Mande ethnic groups, then the understanding of ‘tradition’ cannot be the same as it is in cultures where time is mostly represented as linear. Here, the clue to Mande notions of ‘tradition’ is the cultural importance of story-telling, where the past from which tradition arises alters slightly with every telling of the story in the present. As past is being renegotiated in relation to its context in the present, so is ‘tradition’ reviewed in relation to identity. This means that from the Mande people’s point of view, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ happen/ed virtually at the same time and so cannot be used as separate descriptions.

In light of this, putting aside the tradition/modernity motif as a tool of analysis and instead concentrating on the representation of the power structures that dictate ‘tradition’ offers a more productive analysis of films in the three countries. Kratz deduces that

images of tradition are created in ways related to cultural assumptions and socio-political organization. The images are created and embodied through the activities, intentions, and

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59 Kratz outlines three academic approaches to tradition: tradition as differentiation, as ideology, or as cultural creation (1993: 35). She considers all of them problematic when not viewed as reflective of Western contexts and histories.
agency of individuals but often seem larger than life. (1993: 60)

She implies that individuals within indigenous power structures can regulate ‘tradition’ without it appearing to be dictated by anyone in particular. Thus, using the tradition/modernity motif can only take the analysis so far, because the motif does not set out to identify the power structures manipulating ‘tradition’ in its cinematic representations. In order for the analysis to be more revealing of what is being represented, it must go beyond the appearances of ‘tradition’ and pinpoint the processes that create it. In the case of the three films analysed below, this means looking more closely at the representation of social hierarchies.

2.4 Faro and power structures in the village

In Faro: La Reine des Eaux (Salif Traoré, 2007), the Bambara village elders’ excessive reliance on kinship-based social hierarchy clashes with the views of a young engineer. Zanga (Fili Traoré) returns to his mother’s village, upsetting the village’s pact with Faro, the goddess of water, that it will not shelter any illegitimate children. Zanga, who does not know his father, has always been despised in the village, eventually leaving to pursue education in the city. He nevertheless returns, with a convenient excuse that he needs the chief to sign construction approval for a dam on the village’s river. The film sets up a number of social issues as its themes, e.g. the reliance of the kinship system on the male lineage or the lack of women in the power hierarchy, but its style is distinctly moving away from social realism. From the opening sequence, the aerial shots of the river and the narrative nod towards spirituality suggest an approach more open to aesthetic experimentalism. Accordingly, Penda (Djénéba Koné), mourning the loss of her father, is mysteriously lured into the river and almost drowns. Her fiancée Boura (Michel Mpambara) decides to catch a caiman to prove his love, disregards his father’s warning and drowns. Boura’s father then takes revenge into his own hands while the women of the village demand power is given to Badjegué, an old witch in contact with Faro, until all problems are solved. The men use a ritual to find out which of them fathered Zanga and the women free Penda and her mother from imprisonment.
The village chief signs the papers to approve the construction of the dam and Zanga and Penda leave the village to start a new life together.

_Faro_ shows the power hierarchy of the village as a seemingly democratic setting but the film is also critical of the village council’s and the chief’s disengagement from the outside world. The village works on the principles of gerontocracy, where the eldest men form a council around the village chief (Sotigui Kouyaté). Kouyaté plays the chief as a charismatic figure who commands respect from the villagers but there are moments where his performance reveals a man scared of being out of his depth. When faced with the problem of the overflowing river, the chief struggles to resolve the situation without help from outside the village. Like the rest of the council, the chief has no other choice but to believe the waters will calm down after the goddess is appeased, otherwise his lack of knowledge of how to deal with the situation will undermine his position of authority in the village. When Zanga offers his engineering skills to solve the issue, the chief naturally feels threatened by Zanga’s youth and knowledge coming in from outside the village. The chief’s suspicion of outside interference is a symptom of a larger problem: the power structures in villages in the de-centralized Mali rely on lineage and seniority, meaning that they often miss out on input from better-informed younger generations or members of less prestigious lineages. The villagers in the film have learnt to rely on their own resources, such as honouring the spirits, therefore they regard interference from the outside as potentially threatening to their sovereignty. Zanga seems to be aware of the chief’s fear of losing power by admitting that the dam could be the solution to the village’s problem and he reassures the chief that all he wants is to be useful. Although the situation may appear as a classic tradition/modernity negotiation, it is really a case of a power hierarchy enabled by the country’s political system sustaining itself through an absence of resources. There is no clear-cut distinction between tradition and modernity here because the power hierarchy, ‘traditional’ as it may seem, has a system of checks and balances that keep it in order, making it a more ‘modern’ arrangement than first thought.
One of these checks and balances that monitor the male power hierarchy in the film are women. The complete exclusion of women from the council means that their opinions on the crisis are not heard, leading the women to organize an uprising. None of the women is depicted as actually having an ambition of securing a permanent position in the council of the elders;\(^6\) they are merely venting their frustrations with the men’s inability to fix the overflowing river without sacrificing someone to the river deity. They take it upon themselves to free Penda and her mother after they have been imprisoned by Kouta (Maimouna Helene Diarra), Boura’s father. This abuse of power by Kouta is completely overlooked by the chief and the council members and they only acknowledge it after Kouta’s compound had burned down (a sign from the spirits). The film shows that the women’s power lies in their number and their solidarity,\(^6\) in a complete opposite to the representation of the male power hierarchy which depicts it as individualistic and competitive. The female characters speak up against the men but it is only when they organize that they gain political influence in the village’s power hierarchy. The camera captures the women rushing towards the chief, making them appear as a unified force, literally pushing a member of the council ahead of them. They may not be an official part of the power hierarchy in the village, but the women ultimately have a say in matters they find important.

The most significant, though temporary, influence on the power hierarchy gained by women occurs when the chief admits his weakness and passes his chiefdom onto the eldest woman in the village, Badjegué. A bowl of raw cotton, which Badjegué

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\(^6\) It must be questioned whether the women’s lack of ambition to be in the council is a reflection of the filmmaker’s ideology. In their article for *Cahiers du Cinéma* reprinted in *Screen* (1971), Comolli and Narboni argue that ‘every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it’ (1971: 30) and *Faro* fits in the group of films that are not ‘breaking down (…) the traditional way of depicting reality’ (1971: 32). While *Faro* is not overly experimental in terms of style, this would not justify a claim that the filmmaker is deliberately not depicting women as ambitious individuals. There are scenes in the film, which show women vocalizing their opinions and standing up for what they believe in. In other words, the film is not progressively feminist, neither is it backward-looking: it gives both genders a similar treatment.

\(^6\) Female solidarity in the face of male oppression is a topic favoured by Sembène as well (Busch and Annas 2008: 203-5). Sembène is known for the social realist approach in his filmmaking, so the thematic connection between him and *Faro* signal a continuing interest in social realist cinema, namely in its propensity for representations of power and injustice.
spins into spools of thread while watching over the village, is taken off its three-pronged stand by the river and passed on to the chief. In return, he gives Badjegué an inscribed, paddle-shaped object which is put in place of the bowl on the stand. The symbolism of both objects expresses the kind of power men and women are thought to have in the village: the cotton is a soft material but becomes strong and durable when woven into a thread, it stands for power through production and unity. On the other hand, the paddle is an unyielding instrument of propulsion and combat, showing the inflexible, self-interested and often violent nature of male power in the village. The above scene demonstrates that even though the power hierarchy in the village is in male hands for most of the time, the men know it cannot sustain itself without the support of the women and the option to fall back on them. The two types of power seem to complement each other in situations where aspects of both are necessary for conflict resolution. Still, this temporary change in the power hierarchy does not erase its gender inequality and neither does it address its issues with underrepresentation of younger members of the community. This exchange of power therefore contributes to the flaws of the village’s power hierarchy.

Yet, the power hierarchy in the village is presented from Zanga’s highly subjective point of view, so it should not be interpreted at face value. The film encourages the viewer to see the village from Zanga’s perspective, thus emphasizing the fact that what is seen on screen is a representation filtered through a character’s point of view. In the story, Zanga observes the social hierarchy of the village from

![Figure 4 Zanga’s point-of-view shot in Faro](image)
the position of an outsider. Although he grew up in the village, he soon left to pursue education in the city because he was taunted for his status as an illegitimate child. The experience of growing up at the bottom of the village’s social hierarchy has made him resentful towards the villagers. He is quick to dismiss the power structure in the village as antiquated but in some scenes the camera suggests that his observations are biased by his embittered, outsider status. As Zanga wanders through the village streets, he climbs up a wall to watch the inhabitants in their homes. At first, the camera in this scene is located just above the wall and looks unstable, thus creating a sense that the viewer is watching through Zanga’s eyes. Zanga observes a comical scene between Boura and his father trying to apply fresh mud to their house (see Figure 4). Boura’s father drops all the mud on the floor but when Boura tells him to stop wasting his time, the father refuses to be lectured by his son. In the village, the elder men demand respect regardless of their quality of contribution and so Boura has to let his father continue without complaining. As this shot is from Zanga’s point of view, it raises the question whether Zanga sees all the behaviours of the villagers as comical.\footnote{This scene is followed by a picturesque shot of the sun setting over the river, an image reminiscent of some of the Hollywood productions that utilize the African landscape as a spectacular setting for non-African protagonists. By including Zanga’s outsider point of view as well as this reference to Western films set in Africa, the film alerts the viewer to a certain hierarchy of representation that has been established over the course of cinema history. Imruh Bakari refers to this as ‘Africa (...) being “Othered” outside of modernity, but yet fulfilling a role intrinsic to modernity’s representation of itself; its construction, validation and perpetuation (Bakari 2000: 9). (...) In the contemporary “Western techno-industrial world system”, the cinematic text and its symbolic codes have, and have had, a pivotal and definitive function in this process.’ (Sylvia Wynter cited in Givanni and Bakari 2001: 9).} Indeed, prior to this scene, Zanga is laughing at the chief’s new announcement, at the cattle herder, and at the fisherman upset about the chief’s announcement. This need to reduce the everyday workings of the social hierarchy to ridicule shows that Zanga is repressing his anger at being treated unfairly by the villagers when he was a child. He uses the fact that he has gained education in the city as a reason to feel superior to all of the villagers. Zanga’s performance intends to draw attention to the fact that the film’s representation of the village’s power structure is mediated through his subjective experience of it.
Furthermore, this technique encourages questioning of the viewer’s own assumptions about the rural power structures represented in Francophone West African cinemas. The film subtly highlights the pre-existing negative, possibly Eurocentric, views of rural governance in Africa and attempts to point out their motivation.

Zanga’s reliance on technology is a further manifestation of his need to undermine the men in the village. Zanga uses his gadgets to make up for the low status he had, and still has, in the village as an illegitimate child. To him, technology is a symbol of wealth and knowledge that comes from outside of the village and it therefore signifies his independence of the social hierarchy in the village. The evidence for this lies in the fact that whenever Zanga uses technology, it results in an insult to one of the villagers. For example, Zanga takes out his video camera and starts filming the elders at a meeting of the council, which the council members see as an affront to their authority. In another scene, Zanga drives Penda in his car to the village, whereupon Penda’s fiancée Boura becomes paralyzed by jealousy. Zanga’s effort to compensate for his low societal status in the village by showing off the technology he owns attracts contempt rather than respect. These scenes also suggest that material wealth does not necessarily affect one’s societal status in a kinship-based social hierarchy. In the tightly-knit community on screen, societal status must be negotiated in terms of kinship rather than wealth, since kinship is the currency which sustains the power hierarchy in this village. Yet again, Zanga’s point of view in the film spotlights the viewers’ assumptions about what is considered to be valuable in this society.

These assumptions reflected in Zanga’s belief in the superiority of knowledge and technology over the kinship-based social hierarchy in the village alludes again to the problem of Francophone West African cinemas being seen through the thematic prism of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Jude Akudinobi adds his voice to the previously mentioned criticism of the discourse on African cinema that is based on the hierarchical relation between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and points to the implicit role of the ‘Western gaze’ in this hierarchy. He argues that
posing African traditions as opposite of modernity recasts the terms of reference and allows for the surreptitious projection of a narcissistic Western(ized) self-image. (2014: 48)

Jean-Marie Teno, another well-known Cameroonian filmmaker, has also been championing the integration of the concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ and the discarding of their artificially-created hierarchical relationship. In an interview for the Third Text journal, Teno expresses his frustration with the idea that when new and global elements come to Africa, they are supposed to replace what exists there instead of being integrated and absorbed and transformed. (2015: 68)

Faro emulates Teno’s sentiment with its ending, where the building of the dam is integrated into the resolution of the village’s problems but only after the people have practiced a number of rituals to reinstate peace in the village. Zanga learns a lesson, when he realizes that technology does not make him superior to the villagers and the chief realizes that Zanga’s knowledge does not threaten his authority as the village leader. Both men therefore learn that they are not rivals because they have different values, which is the film’s indirect way of showing that there is no value in comparing two incomparable concepts like ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’.

Moreover, Faro hints at the fact that kinship-based hierarchy reaches beyond the village into the city, thus reiterating the point that stereotypical assumptions about urban and rural areas in Francophone West African cinemas are ill-conceived. During an angry outpouring, Zanga admits to his mother that he cannot get a promotion in his job or find a wife because he does not have his father’s surname that would reveal his family background. This is a crucial revelation about the continued significance of kinship-based social hierarchies in West Africa because it shows that the importance which West Africans place on ancestry and family ties does not diminish with relocation from rural to urban area. Conrad indicates that having a surname means, apart from identifying one as a member of a particular lineage, carrying the specific identity of that lineage (2006: 91). Certain
characteristics, attitudes and professions can be deduced from people’s surnames and this provides a pattern for the majority of personal and professional interactions. Without a surname inherited from one’s father, one is seen as an unpredictable, untrustworthy individual. If ‘traditional’ way of life in the village was a separate entity from ‘modern’ life in the city, then Zanga’s lack of a father would not have an impact on his existence in the city. The film indicates ‘tradition’ versus ‘modernity’ is a false dichotomy and the society it has been applied to is far more ambiguous. Zanga’s questionable status as a man without a father is brought up by one of the elders in the chief’s council when he says ‘We can see that you are successful. But… Who are you? We do not know your father.’ It seems that in the absence of lineage, no amount of success will make Zanga a respected member of the village. In this sense, there is very little that divides the values of the villagers and those of the city inhabitants.

The socio-political separation between urban and rural areas is not as straightforward as the concept of tradition/modernity suggests. *Faro* demonstrates that the kinship-based system may be seen as ‘traditional’ or even archaic because of the assumptions that non-African viewers may have about the governance of rural Mali. However, the film links the kinship-based hierarchy with the urban areas as well, breaking through the image of urban and rural Mali as two distinct worlds run by different principles. *Delwende* presents a similar situation but it is more damming in its implication of Burkina Faso’s de-centralized government. For this film’s female characters, the kinship-based social hierarchy in both town and country threatens to ruin their livelihoods. Theirs is a fight against the use of superstition as a tool for the disempowerment of women by making them lose their status in the family and the community.

2.5 *Delwende* and the power structures organized around morality and witchcraft

*Delwende* shows how fragile status identity can be and how, in some cases, kinship-based social hierarchy in a de-centralized state provides no safety net for
vulnerable members of the society. The film is set in contemporary time in a Mossi village that is facing a crisis. Children in the village are dying with ‘twisted necks’ and, unaware of the ongoing meningitis epidemic, the village elders decide that there is a witch in their midst. Meanwhile, Pougbila (Claire Ilboudo) reveals to her mother Napoko (Blandine Yameogo) that she has been raped but refuses to say who the perpetrator was. Napoko tells her husband Diahrра (Célestin Zongo) that their daughter is unwell and he decides to send Pougbila away to marry a man from a distant village, despite Napoko’s protest. Soon after, the elders order the ritual of siongho to be carried out to find the witch and Diahrра makes sure Napoko is identified as the witch to stop her from asking questions about her daughter’s rapist. She is chased out of the village and ends up in a refugee centre for witches in Ougadougou, where Pougbila finds her and takes her back to the village to make the truth behind the accusation come out.

Both Delwende and Faro depict their main protagonists in unfavourable circumstances, into which they have been forced by their village elders but neither of the films sets out to openly criticize the beliefs that lead to the ostracising of the characters. In Delwende, when Napoko is stricken by the siongho that identifies her as a witch, the camera cuts to the determined look on Diahrра’s face as he pushes the siongho to strike her the third time. When Napoko falls on the ground, the camera appears to momentarily collapse as well. Up until this point, the camera has provided a relatively objective point of view by not adopting high or low angles to establish authority and by not disclosing events that have been hidden to others (i.e. Pougbila’s rape). Therefore, when the camera loses its stable position during the accusation of Napoko, it can be interpreted as a sign that the stability of the social order of the village has been compromised by Diahrра’s intrigue. He has betrayed the trust not only of his wife but of the whole village by manipulating their beliefs as a means to an end. Since the focus of the scene is on Diahrра’s act of false accusation and Napoko’s subsequent escape from the village, the film can be seen as criticizing the fragility of Napoko’s societal status within the village’s social hierarchy rather than the actual belief in witchcraft. Although the two are
intertwined, *Delwende* seems to suggest that belief in witchcraft is a major side effect of women’s low societal status in the kinship hierarchy.

In an interview with Barlet for the online magazine *Africultures*, the director Pierre Yameogo confirms that *Delwende* engages in criticism of the belief in witchcraft but he also says that these accusations are ‘a form of collusion’ (2007). In other words, Yameogo condemns accusations of witchcraft because he believes they are a form of deception by more powerful agents. Roy Armes, for instance, misses the fact that the film targets a specific issue with the power hierarchy when he describes *Delwende* as a ‘powerful denunciation of superstition and blind adherence to tradition in the rural community’ (2006: 94). Armes assumes that the issue is localized to rural communities but his claim proves to be inaccurate when the film shows that urban inhabitants also believe in the existence of witchcraft. The truth is that *Delwende* does not condemn the lifestyles, beliefs, and social order of the village; it denounces those who do not question the impact of their beliefs as well as those who use others’ beliefs for their own gain. This is evidenced in the fact that the film’s major antagonists are Diahrra, the diviner (who is paid for his witch-hunting services) and the rapist (who blindly believes that raping a woman will save him from a curse). Tcheuyap, however, problematizes the symbiotic relationship between witchcraft and the power structure in the village. He contends that witchcraft accusations continue to provoke cruel marginalizations of people, suicides and even madness, but the unanimity with which a given matter is viewed allows a society to maintain its functional coherence. (2011: 212)

Witchcraft accusations are a tool for the maintenance of the power hierarchy in the village. Like the chief in *Faro*, the men leading the village in *Delwende* fear admitting their weakness of not knowing how to cope in the face of a tragedy. Rather than seeking help, which would undermine their authority among the villagers, the village leaders effectively use the belief in witches to scapegoat women.
Moreover, the belief in witchcraft and its punishment is an instrument of power utilized by men, in order to seek revenge on the women they consider to be threatening their societal status. For Diahrra, the suspicions of witchcraft in the village come fortuitously at the time when his wife finds out about his daughter’s rape and starts to ask questions. He knows that if Napoko is identified as a witch, she will be silenced because nobody, including her own family, would wish to be seen with her. Later, as Pougbila is walking through the refugee centres for accused witches in Ougadougou, it becomes apparent that the main targets of the belief in witchcraft are older women. In her report on witchcraft accusations in Africa, Schnoebelen explains that older women are targeted by these accusations because they are no longer economically and biologically productive (2009: 11-14). These women are then considered a burden on a household and an accusation of witchcraft becomes an excuse for their banishment. Schnoebelen also identifies successful and wealthy women accused of witchcraft, in this case because they are upsetting the patriarchal pattern of many power hierarchies. Austen writes that the central trope of witchcraft belief is the misappropriation of scarce reproductive resources from households or communities for the selfish use of accumulating individuals. (1993: 100)

Even if a woman does not have material wealth, she still has reproductive power which is kept under control in ‘the enclosed domestic space in which it serves male-dominated communal norms’ (1993: 100). In short, a woman is the biggest threat to a power structure where the most power is usurped by older men. By accusing her of witchcraft, men are able to strip a woman of her power and the possibility to improve her societal status because she will be ostracized wherever she goes, regardless of her kinship ties.

Delwende shows that kinship is not always a reliable way of providing and maintaining status because it is swayed towards benefiting the male members of a family or clan. Napoko’s first port of call after she is chased out of her village is the village where the rest of her family resides. However, she is not allowed to stay
because she refuses to drink the potion of truth (a highly toxic substance), so the
two male elders of her clan send her away. The men show no mercy towards
Napoko despite her being their relative, as they vest more interest in continuing the
belief in witches in order to maintain their power over the fates of women. Only
through female solidarity, the film demonstrates, can the women accused of
witchcraft finally achieve justice. On her search for her mother, Pougbila is helped
mostly by women, including Napoko’s relatives who feel remorse for letting the
men send her away.

The only man who offers help to Pougbila as she tries to find out what led to the
accusation of her mother is the village fool, incidentally the character with whose
point of view the director identifies in an interview (Barlet 2005). Pougbila
eventually achieves justice for her mother, when she persuades the village elders
(all men) to listen to evidence given by the boy who helped Diahrra carry the
siongho. In other words, the resolution of the problem has been orchestrated by
Pougbila but it must be executed by the men in the village. The final scene in the
film offers perhaps the best summary of Delwende’s commentary on the societal
status of women: the male villagers carry unconscious Diahrra out of his hut, leaving
Pougbila and Napoko with arms linked alone in the centre of a long shot. They have
persuaded the male villagers that Napoko was not a witch but the men seem to be
more interested in putting Diahrra on trial than in reconsidering their belief in
witchcraft or apologizing to Napoko. So, the two women appear deserted in the
long shot, looking in the direction where the men went to judge Diahrra,
presumably disappointed that they cannot be there to argue their point of view. The
isolating long shot also suggests that in spite of being cleared of witchcraft charges,
Napoko is likely to still be shunned to some extend by the community.

Although Delwende presents us with a clear hierarchical division between male
and female villagers, it also captures a strongly community-centred society that has
a collective approach to work, leisure time and decision-making. The film opens with
a scene featuring a harvest celebration and the village’s young dancers perform for
the rest of the village. After the opening credits, the entire village headed by its men
is seen walking in a large formation towards the graveyard to bury and pay respects to a deceased child. These contrasting occasions demonstrate that the villagers pull closer together in times of celebration and crisis, even though the segregation of men and women is still apparent. Yet, as the film progresses, the camera catches the villagers doing their everyday tasks in pairs or groups. Women cycle, carry water and prepare cotton while men weave baskets, work with metal or relax under a tree. All this group activity is recorded in medium shots with the camera angle always matching its subjects’ eye line, regardless of whether they are seated or walking. In this way, the viewer is positioned close enough to feel included in the community rather than being a distant observer yet not as close as to feel like an intruder. The film instils a sense of equality not only between the viewer and the characters on screen but also among the characters themselves. When the men discuss the cause of death of the children in the village, their faces are framed in medium close-up shots and they are all in a line. Again, some form of hierarchy can be spotted during these decision-making meetings, since the men with more authority tend to appear in the foreground of the image. Nevertheless, the film is keen to establish the emphasis put on collectivity and inclusivity in the village, so that the viewer can later fathom the severity of Napoko’s ordeal as an outcast.

Yet, Napoko is not the only outcast in the film. Elie (Thomas Ngourma), the village fool, is also to some extent shunned by the villagers though he is allowed to live on the edge of the village. At the beginning of the film, when the camera aims to establish the collectivity in the village, Elie is the only character that appears alone within the frame but he is intensely observing everyone else around him. This reveals him as an outsider in the village but it is from this position that he is able to notice anything suspicious happening in the village. Elie may be depicted as a fool (living under a tree, surrounded by old radios and rubbish bags) but that does not stop Diahrra to seek Elie’s opinion on the existence of god. It seems that Diahrra is worried that he will be punished for his manipulation of the siongho, so he goes to consult Elie, who he knows will never be taken seriously by the rest of the village. This scene, in which Diahrra talks to Elie, is in fact inserted into the middle of a
scene of Napoko seeking help from her elders and being forced to drink the potion of truth. By editing these two scenes together into a sequence, the film makes a significant comparison between Napoko’s and Elie’s experiences as outcasts at the bottom of the social order. When Elie hints at his awareness of Diahrra’s actions (‘I may be crazy, but I’m not blind’), he is not considered to be a threat to the balance of power in the village. However, when Napoko finds out about Pougbila’s rape and starts to suspect her husband, she upsets the balance of power between a husband and a wife by having this knowledge and is deemed dangerous. In other words, a woman that possesses knowledge is to be feared and ostracized because she has the power to upset the patriarchal social order of the village.

However, despite the suffering Pougbila and her mother have to go through at the hands of the patriarchal social order, Pougbila does not intend to topple the male-focused hierarchy in the village. When she returns to her village after having heard about her mother from her fiancée’s parents, she goes to the chief’s house to find out why her mother was accused of witchcraft. The chief sits in a large wooden chair in front of his house with a child and an old man on either side. Pougbila approaches and squats before the chief. The scene is filmed in a long shot with the chief and his party occupying the majority of the frame and Pougbila squatting in the lower right corner, allowing the superiority of the chief to be conveyed through the mise-en-scène of the image. Still, when Pougbila questions the accuracy of the siongho, she is shot in a close-up so that the viewer can identify with her and her quest for justice more than with the chief. Throughout this scene, he is kept in a position of authority by the camera, particularly when he says that he ordered that Napoko should not be killed (see Figure 5). As he says it, the frame is defined by his figure: his head determines the top of the frame and his feet determine the bottom, and the width of the frame is just enough to incorporate the two boys at his feet. The shot composition gives the chief a larger than life quality whereby he has power over who lives and who dies in the village. Since the shot is also likely to be from Pougbila’s point of view, the viewer begins to comprehend the scale of the chief’s authority in the villager’s eyes. Pougbila suspects that something went wrong with
the *siongho* ritual but she does not defy the chief and the elders, instead choosing to fight for justice by herself. It seems that she is somehow dissatisfied with the patriarchal values of the society she lives in but she tolerates them up to a point when they threaten the wellbeing of her and her mother. In this way, *Delwende* demonstrates that the stratification of society through kinship may at first appear to create a more equal, collective society but it can prove ineffective in the face of its own superstitions.

The film traces the problems with belief in witchcraft to the disproportionate amount of power and lack of integrity of the diviner Raogo (Jules Taonssa). He is invited by the elders to help them find the witch and when he arrives, he quickly usurps the control of the situation from the village elders. Raogo first uses a hen to determine who the witch is but he does not get an answer. In spite of Elie pointing out that, according to the prescribed ritual, the *siongho* ought not to be carried when the hen has not spoken, Raogo proceeds with the ritual. Then, as one of the boys carrying the *siongho* collapses, Raogo asks Diahrra to take the boy’s place, even though he previously insisted that only virgin boys can participate in the ritual. He justifies this decision by proclaiming: ‘tradition gives me the power to make you carry it’. This statement summarizes the problem at the core of the belief in witchcraft among the Mossi people, and that is the amount of power given to people like Raogo, in whose financial interests lies the continued belief in this
superstition. By letting Raogo expose the lack of integrity in his decisions, the film shows that his authority as a leader of the ritual is undeserved. In fact, we can even go as far as to suspect that Raogo received a bribe from Diahrra, given the absence of hesitation when Raogo picked Diahrra to carry the *siongho* and Diahrra’s insincere effort to refuse the nomination. The elders do not dare to question Raogo’s and Diahrra’s conduct for the fear of having someone from their own family accused and their lineage tainted. Since Raogo knows that the accusation of witchcraft has a powerful effect on the status of the involved family, he also realizes that his reputation as a diviner makes him a highly marketable individual. Therefore, when he says the words mentioned above, what he really means is that his power grows from the fear of the villagers of losing their social status.

Finally, *Delwende* emphasizes that the villagers’ fear of witchcraft when the real cause of the children’s’ death is a meningitis outbreak does not intend to confirm the urban/rural divide, or the tradition/modernity dichotomy. In fact, *Delwende* prevents such an interpretation by picturing Pougbila’s journey from the rural area to the city. There, a man on a moped attempts to dissuade her from looking for her mother and asks her to stay with him instead but chases her away when Pougbila reveals her mother was accused of being a witch. The male character’s costume indicates that he sees himself as an urban professional (wears a suit, drives a moped), yet his fear of witchcraft reveals that there is not much difference between him and the villagers. Regardless of its association with modernity, the city proves to be just as alienating for the accused women as the villages. When Pougbila arrives at one of the refugee centres to look for her mother, the scene consists of several shots of women surrounded by their belongings in a large warehouse-style shelter. These shots of desolate women are edited together into a long sequence, conveying the sense of how shattered their lives are in this big space that is designed to isolate them from the rest of the city inhabitants. Thus, *Delwende* offers very little differentiation between the attitudes and beliefs of village people and city dwellers, since witchcraft belief seems to span the urban/rural divide. The distinction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is also blurred because the film
shows that as a woman, Pougbila would only be able to find a shelter in town if she agreed to marry, effectively depending on the ‘traditional’ notion of social status through kinship.

*Delwende* demonstrates that kinship-based social hierarchy among the Mossi people is a particularly limiting system for women as it makes them entirely dependent on the goodwill of the men. Additionally, the film reveals that kinship-based social hierarchy is far from being a matter of the ‘traditional’ rural areas because it continues to be a relevant power structure in the city as well. *Aujourd’hui* further illustrates this situation but it focuses entirely on the urban aspect of kinship identities among the Wolof people of Senegal. This film, too, uncovers the widening cracks in kinship-based social hierarchies, yet it also identifies the ways in which kinship identities can have a beneficial influence on the main protagonist's wellbeing.

### 2.6 *Aujourd’hui*, societal status and ‘becoming’

The 2013 feature film *Aujourd’hui* (*Tey*) by Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis summarizes the life journey of Satché (Saul Williams), as he walks around his city of Dakar for the last time. For reasons unknown to the viewer, Satché has chosen to die at the end of today. So, after he says goodbye to his family and friends, Satché, accompanied by his best friend Sele (Djolof Mbengue), sets out on a journey through the city to ‘live like he has never lived’ (DVD cover, my translation). 63 The film can be interpreted as a meditation on the choices made by one human in order to navigate his life through the complexity of today’s world but eventually, it is the transience of human life that becomes the strongest theme of the film. Yet, its setting in modern Dakar renders the film a more specific, and more urgent, undertone of a struggle for a better life. In fact, this undertone emerges to the surface several times in the film, most notably in the extended sequence recording a violent demonstration for better living conditions. In these instances, the general message of the film of finding pleasure in the fleeting moments of life combines

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63 ‘Satché vit comme il n’a jamais vécu…’
with the specificity of the Senegalese context to portray the very real struggle of creating a better life for oneself in a deeply unequal country.

Before launching into a full analysis of how *Aujourd’hui* portrays the crisis of social hierarchies in Senegal, I wish to draw the reader’s attention first to the fact that both the film’s director Alain Gomis and the main protagonist Saul Williams are not residents in Senegal.\(^6\) This fact has some influence over the way class is depicted in the film. Gomis was born and remains resident in Paris, France and is of Senegalese descent from his father’s side (Armes 2006: 144). Armes locates Gomis in a group of first generation, post-independence filmmakers who have based their practice in Paris with a view to better filmmaking training and an easy access to French government initiatives for ‘African cinema’ (Armes 2006: 145, 148).

However, Armes also points out that Gomis along with other directors of West African descent are keen to maintain their ‘African’ identity and follow the themes of the previous filmmaking generation from the region (Armes 2006: 146, 149). Arguably, in *Aujourd’hui*, Gomis reflects this need to address specifically Senegalese issues but these are framed within a larger, human concern about the inevitability of death, thus giving Gomis the possibility to make an ‘African’ film with relevance that extends beyond its usual markets of film festivals and limited distribution in France. Furthermore, Gomis sets his film in what would to him be a familiar environment of the middle class level of the Senegalese society, as evidenced by the protagonists home environment and travels to the United States. In other words, Gomis makes it clear that he does not want to make a social realist film focusing on problems that he has little experience of. Instead, he chooses a protagonist he can

\(^6\) Gomis explains the decision to cast Saul Williams, an African-American poet and performer, was based on the necessity for a charismatic physical presence because Gomis first imagined Satché will not speak in the film at all (Sinclair 2013). He then adds that Williams’ unfamiliarity with Dakar had worked in Gomis’ favour because the actor regarded his situation as new and special, which is precisely what Satché was meant to behave like during his last day alive. The casting of the African-American actor is also significant in terms of his representation of a middle class Senegalese male. Men like Satché would have acquired, through education and wider access to media and internet, a globalized outlook and better chances of finding employment abroad. In fact, Satché is said to just have returned from the United States in order to die at home. As any other man returning home from life abroad, Satché feels like a foreigner in his country of birth and Williams’ predicament as an American in Senegal highlights this feeling of being an outsider.
identify with and lets the crowd of protesters express more clearly the underlying issues in the film.

Satché’s walk on this day mirrors the journey of his life and the most prominent aspect of the day is his search for a place to belong within the larger social hierarchy of Dakar, as well as within his family. In spite of having a large family that turns up to meet Satché at the beginning of the film, he struggles to find a connection with any of his relatives. He appears confused and almost uncomfortable when they are guiding him down the stairs, while some of his female relatives stare at him without emotion. When they all sit down to talk about Satché’s life, their kind words quickly turn sour as they recount Satché’s shortcomings. The scene shows that even though Satché’s extended family is his fundamental support network, his position within it is constantly renegotiated and dependent on the goodwill of his relatives. When his actions are seen as ungrateful towards the family who supports him (someone mentions Satché has not paid back his success in America), his position in the kinship hierarchy becomes precarious. It is therefore not surprising that Satché struggles to establish a deeper connection with any of the family members, when everyone seeks to profit from their family members’ success.

Satché’s relationship towards his extended family is not very close, yet the film insists on reminding the viewer that family, both extended and immediate, is the only thing Satché can come back to. *Aujourd’hui* does this, for instance, by drawing a parallel between Satché’s first moments waking up in his childhood home and the end of the film when he falls asleep with his wife in his arms. Although the scenes are set in different locations, they both convey the same atmosphere of comfort and a spiritual connection between a body and its environment. In the first scene, the room is dimly lit, with muted noises coming in from the street interrupted by Satché’s slow breathing. As the camera pans across the room, it reveals a wall decorated entirely with photographs outlining the family’s history, old toy cars and other disused objects. The camera then turns into a close-up of Satché’s point of view, as he looks at his hands and touches his skin. This room, where Satché starts his day, can be interpreted as his mother’s womb. He is the closest to his kin here
as well as the most physically aware of his body and the space he finds himself in. The connection that Satché feels with his body in this room is what links him, through his mother, to the family lineage. The next time Satché has the same experience with his physicality is when his uncle shows him how he is going to prepare Satché’s body for the burial. Again, Satché appears more relaxed as his uncle touches his hands and face: the camera switches between close-ups of Satché’s body parts as they are touched and Satché’s face growing more at peace. Finally, Satché’s last moment is a close-up shot of the skin on his wife’s shoulder. These scenes show an almost spiritual connection through the sense of touch between Satché and other members of his family. Despite the perceived lack of kinship between Satché and his relatives, the film uses close-ups to indicate a kinship connection that is beyond Satché’s comprehension. The film presents a vision of kinship that evolves with every physical encounter of family members.

*Àujourd’hui*’s conception of time opens itself for different interpretations but ultimately, it draws attention to the constantly evolving nature of kinship and societal status. Although the film’s narrative suggests that the story happens in one day, there are hints of a more complex temporality. This is particularly evident in a scene, where Satché and his wife sit outside their house and their children, who were toddlers in the previous scene, are now teenagers going out for the night. Up until this point, the film seemed to be a ‘day in the life’ arrangement following Satché’s last day on Earth. In light of the aforementioned scene, however, the film can also be interpreted as showing Satché’s entire life happening in one day. This is a different concept of non-linear time than what I discussed in the previous chapter but nonetheless telling. While in chapter one the past and the present intertwined to comment on the continuing role of ethnic identities, in this chapter the narrative time becomes subjective in order to illustrate the constant evolution of kinship identities. Since Satché’s life occurs within one day, the film is able to show the condensed version of his life and thus highlight the perpetual renegotiation of his kinship identity in relation to his environment. Whenever he changes location and meets people he knows or is related to, the interaction tends to follow a pattern
that demonstrates how Satché’s relationship with the new character develops. So, when he first interacts with his children, Satché makes jokes and pulls faces but as they grow up in the scene mentioned above, he becomes stricter and more worried. The film thus uses subjective narrative time to draw attention to Satché’s kinship identity and the fact that it is in perpetual flux, just like his societal status changes depending on his location.

This concept of constant change in existence is at the centre of Deleuze’s philosophy and it is a useful tool in analysing the representation of kinship identities and societal status in *Aujourd’hui*. What Deleuze calls ‘becoming’ is ‘the unfolding of difference in time and as time’ (May 2003: 147). In other words, it is a concept that opposes other philosophical discourses based on elements of stability in favour of ‘dynamic conceptions of processes in continual transition’ (Grosz 2005: 10). Deleuze resists the idea of stability of being, which he sees reflected in the popular concept of identity and in the way this concept is used to subordinate difference (Deleuze 2004: 91). He prefers to see identity as a side effect of difference due to the fact that internal differences exist between individuals that are thought of as belonging to the same group (Deleuze 2004: 33). This group then differs from other groups, producing an endless amount of differences controlled by a ‘grouping that is merely utilitarian’ (Deleuze 2004: 33). If we interpret societal status as a form of identity, then by Deleuze’s logic societal status is a somewhat artificial summation of all the different social relationships and positions within a hierarchy that an individual occupies. Since these relationships and roles are constantly developing and changing, societal status is therefore interminably subject to difference in time, or ‘becoming’.65

In *Aujourd’hui*, the representation of ‘becoming’ of societal status combines its temporal aspect, as described by Deleuze, with the spatial setting of the narrative.

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65 Applying the concept of ‘becoming’ to kinship identity in this particular film, however, does not fit as easily. Even though there are many differences between Satché and his relatives, the film points to the connection they share through physical contact, as discussed earlier. Kinship identity is therefore portrayed as not just a pragmatic grouping of related people but as a spiritual and physical connection that transcends difference.
In the film, Satché’s societal status is shown not only as different in time but also changing with regards to his environment. When he walks through the busy streets of the city, dressed in clothes similar to others and observing the cheerful passers-by, Satché smiles and moves in a steady, confident, almost joyful manner. His ease of movement exposes how comfortable he is in this type of environment and with people on a similar level of the city’s social hierarchy. However, this changes when he arrives at a modern office building in order to visit his first girlfriend. He tucks his shirt in his trousers; his movement becomes limited in response to the restrictive environment of the building. His former girlfriend teases and insults him, which provokes Satché into physical violence. This office is her territory and she does not treat him with any respect, thus changing his societal status within this space. Although there is clearly an underlying personal reason for the couple to be so alienated, their relationship can be seen as a representation of a wider problem, namely the large gap between an individual’s societal status in his community and his/her status in a municipal, urban environment. It seems that one’s position within a social hierarchy does not fluently translate across different spaces in the city. Such discrepancy in the societal status of an individual becomes explosive, a fact which the film later illustrates with a demonstration, and it threatens the stability of the social hierarchy in the city.

The fact that Gomis included a real demonstration in the film speaks a lot about the film’s discomfort with social hierarchy and particularly with the inflexibility and corruption of an antiquated social order. Sociologist Abdoulaye Bara Diop claims

66 When asked about the juxtaposition between the different environments in Dakar, Alain Gomis comments that he is trying to show the true face of Dakar: ‘Walking in any city, in just 5 minutes you’ll see incredible differences. (...) Truth is in the in-betweens. It’s a feeling. It’s when you go from one thing to another’ (Horowitz 2013). Although this is a rather vague answer from Gomis, it shows that he is sensitive to the dependence of societal status on location within the city. Gomis’s reply suggests that for him, it is the feeling that an individual has when walking between different locations in Dakar that is the most truthful image of the individual’s identity. Rather than two separate identities in two different locations, Gomis claims that it is the transition between the two that is the most revealing. This is in tune with what May writes about Deleuze’s urge to return to ‘the temporal unfolding of difference itself, that difference which is always betrayed when it is, as it is inevitably, frozen into stable identities’ (May 2003: 150). From this, it emerges that the city is a set of areas that trigger the change of one’s societal status, creating further detachment between the areas. It is therefore unsurprising that Dakar’s inhabitants take to the streets, where the differences are the most visible according to Gomis, to fight for better living conditions.
that the caste system remains a strong influence on the social hierarchy among the Wolof:

Dans le domaine des stratifications sociales secondaires, les castes constituent, au sein de la société Wolof, un système important issu d'une époque certainement très ancienne mais qui se maintient avec une persistance remarquable. Il continue d'ordonner les groupes, de déterminer les statuts, les fonctions et les comportements en référence à un ordre social. (2012: 27)

The effects of the Wolof caste system on the social hierarchy are ongoing, as evidenced in some of the language in the film, when during the demonstration a woman looks straight into the camera and announces ‘The children of kings are princes. The children of princes are bandits. (...) We’ve had enough!’ (from English subtitles) The demonstration itself seems to be a general protest against the inequality of the social hierarchy in Senegal, rather than against a specific problem. Yet, the language alluding to the Wolof caste system can be understood as localizing the film within the Wolof ethnic group, thus addressing some specifically Wolof concerns. Since Gomis’s treatment of social status in the film is comparable to ‘becoming’, then the incorporation of a demonstration against stagnant social hierarchy completes a message encouraging rebellion against the social order. However, the Wolof social hierarchy is based on kinship identity, which Gomis seems to view positively. What Gomis implies by his distinctly opposite approaches to kinship identity and social status is that he believes the two concepts should not influence each other and therefore exist in completely separate spheres of relevance in order to prevent the corruption of social order.

The cracks in the social hierarchy, however, show much earlier than the demonstration in the city and they highlight the lack of investment in education and careers of young people from poorer backgrounds. The first time Aujourd’hui points

67 ‘In terms of secondary social stratification, the castes in the Wolof society constitute an important system, which is certainly very old but is maintained with remarkable persistence. It continues to stratify groups, determine their status, functions and behaviours in reference to a social order.’ (my translation)
out this issue is when Satché visits a group of his old friends, who trade in cannabis in a half-built house on the outskirts of a residential area (see Figure 6). Firstly, the setting signifies the minimal interest of the Senegalese establishment in allowing young people to build and develop careers and better standing in the society. These young men have to make a living in the drug trade because their lowly position in the social hierarchy does not give them the capacity to link with, to utilize, and transform, that is, to unbecome, the apparent givenness and inertia of material objects and to give to these objects new virtualities, new impulses and potentials. (Grosz 2005: 10)

By using building sites in order to ‘unbecome’ their inertia, i.e. to make them into a home that would provide them with some security, the young men would be able to challenge their stagnating social statuses. Instead, the men only have temporary use of this building site which they have equipped with an old, elaborately carved-out dining chair they treat like a throne. This object and their dialogue (‘Man, we could have changed things’) suggest a definite ambition to succeed that had been thwarted by a corrupted social hierarchy (‘We do not need heroes, we need unions’). Additionally, halfway through the scene the lighting changes from natural light to a warm, high angle spotlight that creates a stage-like setting. The lighting change makes the men’s environment appear claustrophobic, a nod to their limited opportunities at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Figure 6 In the abandoned house in Aujourd’hui
Aujourd’hui’s critical stance towards the social hierarchy in Dakar and among the Wolof people is in a stark contrast to its treatment of kinship identity of Satché. The film turns quite political, with its use of footage from a demonstration and its critique of the establishment’s reluctance to improve the conditions for young people. Yet, while social status determined by kinship and caste is depicted as corrupted, kinship identity that does not affect social status and enables a closer connection with family members appears in a positive light. The film can thus be interpreted as Gomis’s comment on the necessity to remove familial connections from their role as determinants of social status.

In conclusion, social hierarchies, the negotiation of social status as well as kinship identities all ought to be considered when interpreting the representation of social issues in Francophone West African cinemas. These are the concepts that sustain the power structures dictating most aspects of daily life across the rural and the urban areas of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. The notion that kinship-based social hierarchies are the vestiges of ethnic cultures in the rural areas is as inaccurate as the belief that ethnicity is not a significant form of identity in Francophone West Africa. Films such as Faro and Delwende openly criticize this idea, by showing that the transgressions against the established social hierarchies in the village have consequences for the characters in the city too. The two films also reveal some of the tools used by the kinship-based social hierarchies to maintain social order, including temporary gender-balanced power sharing and witchcraft accusations. Crucially, Faro and Delwende show just how critical kinship is in determining one’s social status, demonstrating the importance of studying representations of kinship identity in Francophone West African films. Out of the three films in this chapter, however, Aujourd’hui is the most damning regarding the impact of kinship-based social hierarchies on the social status of young people. Even though the film views kinship identity as beneficial to its protagonist’s wellbeing, it identifies the considerable inequality inherent in the type of hierarchy that combines kinship and caste to determine social statuses of young Wolof people in Dakar. Rather than simply interpreting the films in this chapter as
representations of specific social issues, the films ought to also be seen as engaging with larger power structures and the forms of identity that sustain them.

The kinship-based social hierarchies represented in the films in this chapter have created many obstacles for a balance of power between men and women. Women benefit the least from these power structures, which is a problem identified by a number of Francophone West African filmmakers, highlighting a need for the type of feminism that would be suited to this specific cultural context. Nevertheless, as with Western feminisms, ‘African’ feminisms are not suitable for an indiscriminate application to Francophone West African film. The next chapter will investigate some of the ‘African’ feminisms applied in the analysis of Francophone West African films and examine how these films represent female characters.
Chapter Three

Representations of Gender Identities

On the topic of the image of African women in film, Nigerien filmmaker Mariama Hima once admitted that

as a woman, I would say I have experienced colonisation at two levels: the colonisation of African countries by Europeans which concerns us all; and the masculine colonisation in relation to women. (...) I think that there is a reconversion of our mentality to be done in relation to African thought. (2000: 104)

Hima makes three points that will be significant in the course of this chapter. Firstly, she indicates that ‘masculine colonization of women’ is a process that has happened in her lifetime and it can be reversed. Secondly, by associating the male colonisation with European colonisation, Hima hints at the fact that the implementation of patriarchal ideology does not entirely originate within the region of Francophone West Africa. Thirdly, she acknowledges that the perception of female inferiority is now deeply rooted in many people’s mentality, and this is reflected in the images of women in Francophone West African film, a fact she mentions later on. Hima’s claims raise urgent questions about the representation of women in Francophone West African films. For instance, do Francophone West African cinemas represent female disempowerment as related to ethnic cultures or as a symptom of social hierarchies that have adopted patriarchal ideology? And how are the female characters affected by the ‘masculine colonization’ shown to be dealing with the deterioration of their societal status? I aim to address the above questions in this chapter using an analysis of three films that explore the

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68I am using the term patriarchy as it was defined in Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives(McCann and Kim 2016), in which it is described as ‘a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.’
intersections of female and ethnic identities in contemporary cinematic production of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso.

The three films I will be analysing in this chapter include *Mossane* (Safi Faye, 1996), *Djanta* (Tahirou Tasséré Ouédraogo, 2006) and *Taafe Fanga* (Adama Drabo, 1997). I have selected these films due to their primary focus on female protagonists’ struggle with their ethnic identities and the patriarchal values of their communities. While the first two films are similar in their plot, which involves young women resisting arranged marriages, they are based in different ethnic groups (Serer and Mossi) thus offering insight into the differences in female identities based on ethnicity. The last film, *Taafe Fanga*, departs from the more personal focus of the first two films, as it portrays a Dogon69 legend of a village where male and female gender roles switch over. Despite the varying temporal and cultural settings, all three films highlight the problematic place of patriarchy in the respective ethnic groups and the effects it has on both the protagonists and the community as a whole.

My two main aims in this chapter will be to determine whether patriarchal values are depicted in the films as an inseparable element of ethnic identities, and to identify the extent to which these values are shown to affect the developing female identities in the films. Intersections of female identities with racial and/or ethnic identities is a rich topic that has been well-discussed by feminist writers and theorists past and present, including, among others, bell hooks (1987), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) and Rey Chow (1993). In developing my argument in this chapter I have negotiated those feminist authors and theories that place the intersections of ethnic and racial identities with feminism at the top of their agenda. This was, in fact, one of the driving forces behind the rise of third-wave and intersectional feminisms in the 1990s, at the forefront of which were writers including Judith Butler and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. The early days of this era saw the emergence of feminist theories that address the missing narratives of non-white,

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69 An ethnic group descended from the Mande people, but who also have a linguistic connection to the Mossi people (Stoller 1992: 176).
non-Western women, such as Africana Womanism and intersectional feminism. Throughout the analysis, I will refer back to any relevant parts of these theories and feminist authors’ works while also using the Deleuzian concepts of ‘becoming’ and his theory of time.

As in the previous chapters, I have found the application of Deleuze’s thought provides more insight when matters of identity and difference are being considered. Although, arguably, Deleuze’s theoretical work at first appears to have very little relevance to the portrayal of non-European female identities, I believe there are aspects of his theoretical work that can be applied in the analysis of the above films. For instance, Mossane suggests that the female protagonist occupies both the linear, narrative time of the story as well as a non-linear, mythical time, thus providing some comment on how the representations of gender have been affected by history. Nevertheless, this approach also has shortcomings and I will address these as and when they emerge.

3.1 African feminisms and ethnic identities

First, however, I would like to acknowledge why it is important to discuss the intersections of ethnic and female identity in these films and in general. To a non-African viewer, the films that are set within West African ethnic groups may appear as somewhat oppressive environments that are overly reliant on patriarchal values. The female protagonists are often limited in their life choices by the community’s perception of marriage as a woman’s ultimate purpose. And even when they get married, the role of authority in women’s lives passes from their father to their husband. Although there is definitely a case to be made about the oppression of women in the region, it would be unfair to use a non-African perspective to summarize all ethnic identities as inherently patriarchal, especially since a detailed analysis of these films reveals a far more complex relationship between patriarchy and ethnic identity. More contextual analysis is needed to clarify the motivations behind what appears to be a system skewed towards the benefit of men rather than women. Furthermore, a generalization of the representations of these ethnic groups as being entirely patriarchal risks putting the female characters into a
position of resigned subservience. The female characters are, mostly, far from subservient but they also have respect for their culture, their elders and the well-being of their community. This leads to inevitable clashes within the community but also within the female character’s identities. For this reason, it is important that the female protagonists are seen as both individuals and members of their ethnic group.

Moreover, it must also be considered that gender identity has historically been more fluid among some ethnic groups of West Africa, as opposed to the strictly feminine or masculine gender identifications in the West. Ifi Amadiume, a Nigerian anthropologist and feminist author, identifies ‘linguistic and historical differences’ that gave ‘African gender systems a flexibility which allows a neuter construct for men and women to share roles and status’ (1997: 112). The possibility of not having strict gendering meant that these societies did not originally develop gender stereotypes rooted in gender hierarchy, in the same way it occurred in Europe. Power and status were shared across the sexes as neither was seen more qualified or stronger than the other. The fact that in these cultures the roles and status of men and women were independent of their sex is consistent with Butler’s proclamation that ‘gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex’ (1990: 9-10). Ethnic groups that had the neutral gender system would not affix specific traits to any gender since gender could, regardless of biological sex, change during a person’s lifetime.

However, the gender fluidity established in West African cultures prior to colonisation was ‘rigidified during colonial rule and [has] become part of the post-colonial heritage in African urban communities’ (Makuchi and Abbenyi 1997: 23).

Some films suppose that gender fluidity has survived to some extent in certain ethnic groups of West Africa; it is certainly reflected in the character of Mossane’s.

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70 Hoffman confirms that this was the case in the Mande language family as well, so ‘all nouns and pronouns, with the exception of the words for woman, man, mother, and father, brother, sister, are formally and semantically gender-neutral’ (2016: 101). She points out that when being translated into English or French, these gender-neutral nouns are frequently masculinised (2016: 102).
authoritative mother and it is a central theme in the gender-switching story of Taafe Fanga.

In addition to being considered fixed and binary, gender identity in the West has long been theorized separately from other forms of identity. One of the crucial points in the debate about gender identity and especially the marginalization of black women in the feminist movement was the introduction of the term intersectionality by Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality, according to Crenshaw, is rooted in the idea that female identity does not exist separately from other aspects of identity, such as race, class, ethnicity, etc. Thus, the oppression of women ought not to be viewed simply from the point of view of gender, when other forms of oppression, such as racial and/or class, may be in operation (Carastathis 2014: 304).

A year later, Butler published Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. In the book, Butler articulated her growing concerns about the isolationist attitudes towards feminism and identity and argued against the decontextualization of the two concepts from influences such as class, race and ethnicity. By asserting that there is a ‘multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of “women” are constructed’ (1999: 19–20), Butler paved the way for a debate about gender that is less binary and more receptive to the variety of outside influences, much like the idea Crenshaw captured with intersectionality.

Particularly regarding the intersection of gender and race, Crenshaw’s and Butler’s comments were echoed in the writings of Clenora Hudson-Weems, who, in order to prioritize the problems of Black women, coined the term Africana Womanism (1993).\textsuperscript{71} She distinguishes Africana Womanism from feminism by claiming that

Africana Womanism is family-centred, whereas feminism is female-centred. Our priorities are race, class, and gender,

\textsuperscript{71} There are other terms being coined at this time. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie creates Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) in order to separate the African feminist debate from the influences of the West (Kempen 2001: 8). Obioma Nnaemeka talks about her term nego-feminism as an embodiment of negotiation in feminism, based on the value many African cultures place on the principle of negotiation (Akin-Aina 2011: 70).
while the feminist concentrates on gender issues. We strive for race empowerment; the feminist, no matter what form of feminism, strives for female empowerment. (2001: 138-139)

What Hudson-Weems aims to acknowledge through her theory is that racial equality is a priority because without it, there can be no gender equality for black women. Ogundipe-Leslie, the proponent of Stiwanism (see previous footnote), opposes Africana Womanism’s emphasis on race, claiming that ‘black men and black women cannot unite around conflicting interests and across antagonistic classes’ (1994: 207). These differences in feminist values may also be symptomatic of a wider split between African (Stiwanism) and African American (Africana Womanism) feminist movements. Fatou Sow, a Senegalese sociologist and feminist writer, identified a rift in feminist discourse about black women in America and black women in Africa\(^72\) and questioned whether the Western feminist movement is aware of the specificities of African patriarchies. The crucial issue seems to be the fact that racial division is a more significant factor in North America than it is in West Africa. Although race remains an equally important concern, it should not overshadow the fact that parts of West Africa are predominantly populated by black people who self-identify first in terms of ethnic affiliation, as discussed in the first chapter. Here, the specificities of ethnic identity would play a major role in shaping feminism (Nkealah 2016: 63).\(^73\) Other feminist issues, such as promoting the standard of living for women (Sow 2012: 150) and female inequality in some of the

\(^{72}\)Lors des grandes conférences internationales sur les femmes et autres thèmes d’intérêt, les Africaines se sont inquiétées des projets féministes dans lesquelles elles ne retrouvaient pas toujours leurs priorités ou se sentaient marginalisées. (...)Pour les chercheuses et activistes, il était difficile de dialoguer avec le discours féministe dominant, libellé occidental, ce qui se justifiait à bien des titres. La rupture était perçue comme une nécessité impérieuse, politiquement correcte’ (2012: 150). ‘At major international conferences on women and other themes of interest, African women were concerned about feminist projects which did not reflect their priorities or in which they felt marginalised. (...) For the researchers and activists, it was difficult to engage with the dominant feminist discourse, using Western terminology, which was in many cases justified. The split was perceived as a necessity that was politically correct’ (my translation).

\(^{73}\)For instance, some ethnic groups in West Africa are traditionally matrilineal, such as the Wolof, while others adopted patrilineage, including the Mande (Rashid 2006: 119). All of these groups would have been affected by colonisation and its subsequent imposition of Western gender ideology and patriarchal norms (Amadiume 1987: 119). When the pressure of female emancipation starts to build in the post-independence era, those groups that had been matrilineal in the pre-colonial period would respond to a different type of feminist agenda than the groups that remain patrilineal.
continent’s religions and cultures (Sow 2012: 154) are also factored in as needing a specific, ethnically sensitive feminist response. In this chapter, the films represent black women from three ethnic groups facing similar issues of inequality but resolving them in very different ways, depending on the specific social hierarchy of their ethnic groups.

Additionally, other African feminists would strongly disagree with Hudson-Weems’ statement regarding the centrality of family in black women’s lives. As Africanist and sociologist April A. Gordon postulates, the needs of African women vary with regards to their differing situations (1996: 24). Gordon adds that there are instances when women actively fight for female empowerment within African societies (1996: 24), meaning that these women do not ignore the value of female-centred feminism. The Nigerian feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has famously criticized the assumption that African women prioritize family, when she explained that

because I am a female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. (...) But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we do not teach boys the same?. (Ngozi Adichie 2013: 28-9)

The above clashes between Africana Womanists, Stiwanists and other African feminists shine a light on the fact that there is a number of African feminisms, each prioritizing different values and combating varying aspects of female inequality. Gender studies scholar Mary Modupe Kolawole indicates that issues like those mentioned above ‘arise because many versions of feminism leave out cultural context’ (2002: 95). These differences should be kept in mind when analysing the representations of women in Francophone West African films, as they demonstrate the need for nuance when considering the intersections of gender and ethnic identities.

What most African feminists share, however, is their effort to distance themselves from Western feminists on the basis of the historical aggression of the
West towards the populace of the African continent. Feminist scholar Naomi Nkealah sees Western feminisms as a continuation of the ‘cultural imperialism by which the West undermines the philosophical ideologies and belief systems of African peoples’ (2016: 62). Moreover, feminist author Nah Dove claims that Europe and Africa operate on different gender systems originating in ancient history. Dove bases her writing on Cheikh Anta Diop’s cradle theory, in which he proposes two distinct cradles of civilization – north and south – with distinct societal structures (1998: 520). While in the north, Europe gives rise to patriarchy due to the priority of physical strength in its harsher climate, Africa produces matriarchal societies reliant on agriculture in its fertile climate (1998: 520). Diop and Dove claim that the two systems produced contrasting social hierarchies which resulted in markedly diverse gender roles in the two areas. With the introduction of Islam into Africa, some of these values started disintegrating (Amadiume 1997: 122), and the process continued with European colonisation, which has eventually ‘undermined the traditional empowering structures of African women’s socio-cultural systems’ (Amadiume 1997: 111). In addition to their diminishing influence within their own societies, African women were also objectified by the colonising societies, leaving what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls ‘a legacy of marginalization within the indigenous society as much as within the colonizing society’ (2012: 48). All this means that there is a lot more pressure on African feminisms to condemn the oppressive mechanisms (Arndt 2002: 32) that contributed and continue to contribute to their disempowerment.  

Consequently, African feminisms could be seen as contradicting some of the principles of Western feminisms because they must decide, claims Susan Arndt, which elements of ethnic cultures are empowering for women in order to counter Western views of African societies as inherently patriarchal (Arndt 2002: 32).

74 It must be noted here that apart from Sow, the feminist scholars consulted in this section of the chapter come from African countries formerly colonised by the British. More research is needed to establish whether Francophone African feminisms differ from Anglophone African feminisms and whether that can be linked to ideologies projected by the former dominant power. The hegemony of English language in the research on feminism has already been identified (Descarries 2003) and scholars working in the field of African cinema have shown sensitivity to such issues (see Bisschoff 2009).
Gender scholar Desiree Lewis illustrates this gap between Western and African feminisms using the examples of

the cultural resonance of motherhood as practice and icon, as well as the valorising of ‘superwomen’ [which] mean that African women’s official identities frequently challenge the myths and stereotypes linked to Western notions of femininity. Do the different identities imply a refusal of gender hierarchies, or do they indicate an inscription of gender hierarchies into contextually-specific roles for African women?. (2001: 6)

Lewis and Arndt agree that there are some profound differences between how Western and African feminisms perceive what is empowering to women. Applying the concerns of Western feminisms to African feminisms risks invalidating the specific cultural and social roles of women in African ethnic communities, which would be tantamount to an imperial ideology. Therefore, it is necessary for any analysis of Francophone West African cinemas that focuses on the representation of women to be sensitive to the ethnic and cultural context of these films. Using feminism as a theoretical framework for film analysis must then come with the awareness of the cultural significance of specific types of feminism for the narrative universe of the work being analysed. Otherwise, such analysis risks misinterpreting the empowering roles female characters can play in their respective societies.

All three films in this chapter reflect the reality that women share a crucial role in their respective societies and that is one of community cohesion. Women are portrayed as negotiators not only within their families and clans but also on a larger scale, female characters tend to pacify the fraught relations between lineages, ethnic groups, religions, and others. The association of female characters with negotiation is based on the continuing role of peace-makers many African women have in their societies. When writing about the role of women’s movements in the depoliticization of difference, political scientist Aili Mari Tripp observes that across the African continent, the
efforts to establish autonomous, broad-based women’s organisations in Africa have been in response to the divisiveness, corruption, and violence associated with state patronage politics, patterns that have not benefited the majority of women. (2000: 656)

The aim of these women’s organizations is not intended to take political power and return to the pre-colonial matriarchal social order. Rather, it provides a means to redress the inequality that currently exists between the traditional ruling clans or ethnic groups and those that are not in power and therefore lack the opportunity to express their concerns. The power of women to unite communities fraught with difference is strongly communicated in the three films selected for this chapter, though the women often have to pay with their lives for changes to occur. Mossane’s death unites the villagers in their grief for her; Djanta’s death unites fathers in her village with their daughters, and the little girl in Taaffe Fanga negotiates the end of the rift between the men and the women in her village. These female protagonists are shown to suffer the most from the divisions in their villages and therefore they are also the first to attempt to instil more balance.

In terms of representation of female identities by African filmmakers, there is some discussion about whether and how feminist approaches to this topic vary between West Africa and the West. Kenneth Harrow distinguishes the feminism of African cinemas as one in which ‘the solutions put forth take the form of women joining the exclusive male club, not disrupting the established order’ (1999: 230). Harrow describes a seemingly clear-cut difference but on second thoughts, the statement is not entirely comparative. If, as Harrow claims, the female protagonists in African cinemas aimed to join the male club, then their actions would necessarily need to be disruptive to the established order. Since the established order exists to hold women in submission in the lower levels of the social hierarchy, then any attempt by women to change their position will upset the order. In this sense, there would be very little difference between the feminist approaches in African cinemas and cinemas in the West. Nevertheless, I suspect what Harrow aims to say is that in these films the female characters seem to fight against specific aspects of their own
cultures that oppress them rather than oppose the whole social order presented in the films.

Furthermore, the representation of women in Francophone West African cinemas relies overwhelmingly on the distinctive principles of African feminisms. Feminist African filmmakers are frequently showing their female protagonists in positions of strength in order to ‘deconstruct the image of the passive victim’ (Thackway 2006: 151). It is not just female feminist filmmakers, however, who are keen to represent strong female protagonists. In fact, Lindiwe Dovey would go as far as to say that African cinema in general is profoundly feminist, regardless of the director’s gender. Dovey puts the feminist nature of African cinema down to two factors: lack of the voyeuristic male gaze as described by Laura Mulvey,75 and female characters that are ‘unconventional, rounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes fighters (...) prepared to go out to work to support their husbands and families’ (2012: 19). Crucially, these films do not obfuscate the fact that females occupy the lower positions of the social order; the filmmakers do not engage in fantasies of a polished world with gender equality. Instead, they show the type of unfair treatment their strong female characters have to suffer in order to expose the futility of a system that discriminates against them because of their gender. In that sense, these filmmakers are following the objectives of African feminisms outlined above by Arndt. Their films engage in negotiation of the aspects of ethnic cultures that are particularly harmful to women, while making sure their criticism does not represent these ethnic cultures as inherently patriarchal. This approach, which takes as its basis the assumed distribution of gender roles in the societies depicted, prompts Harrow to ask ‘whether European feminists would regard African feminist filmmaking practices as inadvertently sustaining a patriarchal order’ (1999: 231). Harrow’s question is in itself problematic because he seems to regard the two feminist fields as existing in a hierarchy, which betrays his lack of understanding of the differences between African and Western feminisms. Harrow’s answer relates to what Dovey claims about the lack of male gaze in African filmmaking, as he

75 The male gaze is a term coined by Mulvey and defined as a projection of male ‘fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly’ (2003: 47).
reconciles African feminist filmmaking with European feminism by asserting that they both aim to disrupt patriarchal order through new approaches to ‘signifying practices of the body’ (1999: 240). This de-fetishization of the black female body is one of the motives behind Safi Faye’s feature fiction film Mossane.

3.2 Mossane: demise of the monumental ‘girl’ through clientelistic practices

Mossane is a film that celebrates the exceptional beauty of its main character of the same name (Magou Seck) without letting her be defined purely by her physical appearance. Mossane’s beauty is also the main source of her troubles, because not only it makes her own brother fall in love with her, it becomes a bargaining chip in her parents’ negotiation for a financially advantageous marriage. Yet, Mossane refuses to be manipulated into a marriage with a man who lives in Paris and whom she has never seen. Instead, she wishes to go away with a poor university student Fara (Alioune Konaré) despite him not being able to offer any money to Mossane’s parents. When Fara leaves, heartbroken, Mossane defies her parents during her wedding ceremony and runs away, only to be found dead by the villagers on the river bank the next day. The whole village sees Mossane’s death as a loss of a divine gift from the gods.

First, it must be noted that the film connects Mossane’s character with the picturesque landscape and the elements, including water and sand, found in it. The first time we see Mossane, she is a silhouette bathing in the river turned golden by the setting sun, emphasizing the ‘communion between the people and their environment’ (Thackway 2006: 155). It looks as if we are witnessing Mossane’s birth as she emerges out of the river and runs off screen. This introductory scene appears to celebrate not only the beauty of this area of Senegal but also the way in which natural beauty is reflected in the personal appearance of a character residing in this landscape. Still, the scene is shot in a style that avoids visual exploitation of both the setting and the protagonist. The river’s golden surface takes up the entirety of the

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76 Cynthia Marker explains that Mossane ‘invokes the traditional myth of a young woman born every two centuries whose exquisite beauty inevitably leads to her premature death’ (2000: 465).
frame, thus rejecting any exoticisation of the location through long panning shots. Likewise, Mossane features as a dark silhouette in the centre of a long shot and the lack of focus on any distinctly female parts of her body means that the shot refrains from sexual objectification. Like the landscape believed to accommodate her ancestors (in the same way landscape in Keita does), Mossane is depicted with respect and admiration by the camera in this shot.

Mossane’s connection with the ancestors and the mystical aspect of the land means that she commands admiration and respect from the rest of the village. Boys act shy in front of her, adult men stop in their work to greet her and elder women admire her. Having this much respect for a young female is rather unusual, especially in a society that places elder men at the top of its social order. However, this respect for Mossane only lasts up to a certain point, when her beauty begins to be seen by her parents as a means to secure an advantageous marriage. The film illustrates this change of the villagers’ attitude towards Mossane by drawing a poignant comparison between her and the white bull chosen to be sacrificed at the village’s next ceremony. At first, the white bull is admired for its beauty and strength by two boys who are running after Mossane. For a fleeting moment, the white bull and Mossane appear in the same shot and although Mossane is running while the bull is tied to a tree, the shot hints at the fact that Mossane is not as free as she may appear. Like the white bull’s appearance, Mossane’s exceptional beauty is something that grants her respect but it will ultimately tie her down in her future choices. Both the animal and Mossane have their fates determined for them by others (the villagers want to sacrifice the bull and her parents want to marry Mossane off for money) but nobody seems to care about what is best for them. Mossane and the bull will both be sacrificed in order to benefit others. The scene in which the white bull is tipped over to be ceremonially slaughtered is intercut with a scene of Mossane, also lying on her side, refusing to let Fara get close to her. Through editing, the film links the fates of Mossane and the white bull, suggesting that their exceptional beauty is what will make them suffer and eventually cause their demise.
However, Mossane’s connection with the land and the ancestors while she seems disconnected from the advances and wishes of others can also be hinting at a deeper rift between the different temporalities at play here. By these temporalities I mean the conceptions of time theorized by Julia Kristeva but also present in Deleuze’s writing on becoming-woman in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). In *Women’s Time* (1981), Kristeva explains that ‘female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time’ (1981: 16). Repetition is characterized by cycles and biological rhythms, while eternity stands for the infinite, all-encompassing monumental time. These are, Kristeva notes, ‘the fundamental, if not the sole, conceptions of time in numerous civilizations and experiences, particularly the mystical ones’ (1981: 17). Both repetition and eternity permeate the daily life of Mossane. For example, the concept of monumental time can be used to explain the presence of the mythical Serer messengers called Pangools, who would be neglected in a film situated purely in the linear/historical concept of time. As mythical creatures, the Pangools are subjects to monumental time, which encompasses all events the Serer people believe have happened in time. Since the monumental time is also infinite and non-linear, it enables the Pangools to physically exist among the Serer people. However, it is specifically Mossane’s existence that makes the Pangools appear. Her beauty is a gift from the Serer deity and as such it links her closer to her divine/mythical parents rather than her actual family.

If the use of the mythical past and the present in the first chapter highlights the continuing role of ethnic identities, then a similar blending of temporalities in *Mossane* indicates a representation of gender identity that precedes the implications of colonial patriarchal ideology. In that sense, Mossane can be interpreted as a woman whose identity stems from Africa’s matriarchal past as described by Diop and Dove. Since she originates from a different time in her ethnic group’s history, the change in how she is treated during the film demonstrates the drastic deterioration of women’s status in the group’s (and the continent’s) history.
In one scene, Mossane digs her hands into the arid land outside her village, begging her ancestors to take her away (see Figure 7). Not only is this an expression of just how demeaning her position as a young woman is in her society that she would rather die than be treated as an object; it is also a wish for gender roles to return to what they were when the land was cultivated and fertile. Unlike Western feminisms, African feminisms are inspired by the social hierarchies of the past, when women seemed to be the centre of social organisation. Thus, Mossane formulates particular aspects of African feminisms in drawing attention to the favourable status of women in the past, when gender roles were not as restricted as they appear to be in the present.

Mossane is treated like a servant by her own family, revealing a contrast between gender roles in private and in public. As soon as her parents and their friends get back from the ceremonial sacrifice of the white bull, Mossane’s mother calls for her to start preparing the table and serving the food. She still joins her parents and their guests for the meal but eats very little and leaves the room promptly. Throughout the film we see Mossane doing various household chores as well as caring for her brother, while Mossane’s mother and father make all the

\[\text{Figure 7 The moment Mossane calls to her ancestors features on the film’s poster}\]
decisions on behalf of their daughter and her future. She is clearly being trained by her mother in all the roles which a young wife would be expected to perform. The situation is different when Mossane is away from the house, not under her parents’ supervision. Here, she does whatever she wishes and spends her time with Fara despite not having her parents’ consent. The fact that Mossane is expected to fulfill patriarchal gender roles by her parents inside their home but not by others on the outside suggests that these gender roles are flexible depending on the location. Furthermore, the fact that patriarchal gender roles are not reinforced outside the house also means that these roles are not necessarily dictated by the wider Serer community.

In fact, the film does not contain any indications that patriarchal gender roles are linked to ethnic identity specifically. Rather, restrictive gender roles are maintained by the kinship system, which enables marriage to be a tool of economic aspiration, as discussed in the preceding theoretical section of this chapter. In his book on Serer women, Issa Laye Thiaw specifies that women receive respect from their community and should they be courted for marriage, the women’s consent is just as important as that of their families (Thiaw 2005: 92). In other words, the Serer ethnic group does not impose patriarchal gender roles on its women; the women’s choices regarding their futures are honoured. However, Mossane’s choice not to marry the rich Diagoye and instead leave the village with Fara is refused outright by her parents, who have their minds set on becoming related to the rich man living abroad. For her parents Mossane is an asset, used as a general servant while she lives at home, and a bargaining chip used to acquire a connection with a wealthy family. The fact that Mossane is practically sold to her husband to improve her parents’ societal status through kinship relation is therefore an expression of the flaws of kinship politics, not ethnic Serer culture. The failure to see this complexity could be a symptom of the cultural imperialism often inherent in Western feminisms as pointed out by Nkealah and Smith earlier on, thus demonstrating the necessity to read these films using African feminist perspectives. The film criticises the fact that, in the absence of professional opportunities for women, families rely
on their daughters to improve their societal status by marrying into more affluent families. This is demonstrated in the scene in which Mossane’s mother rejects Mossane’s suitor Sitor (Saliou Diouf), despite knowing he comes from a lineage of a good name, because he is too poor and the beauty of her daughter could secure her a more financially advantageous match. In that way, Mossane’s mother maintains patriarchal attitude towards marriage for her own financial benefit rather than out of any sense of duty or ethnic identity.

Moreover, the film draws attention to the fact that in this village, marriages arranged for financial profit are not the norm, they are the result of parental greed and control. This can be demonstrated by a closer look at Mossane’s and Mossane’s friend Dibor’s (Guèye Seynabou) homes and their behaviour within them. Mossane and her family live in a brick-walled house with a porch, so they are clearly wealthier and/or more interested in keeping up appearances. Yet in the scenes when she is at home, Mossane is never depicted alone or in charge of what is going on. She is always either interrupted or told what to do by someone else. At home, Mossane either appears in high angle shot, suggesting that she is watched over, or shares the frame with other people. Dibor, on the other hand, lives in a hut with her husband and her mother but she seems to be in control of the household. In the two scenes at Dibor’s home, she always occupies a long shot and her husband is either lower in the frame or in the background. She decides when she will be intimate with her husband as well as what they are going to eat and her mother encourages her in claiming the decision-making power. Even though Dibor is already married and therefore has more control over her life than Mossane, there is a sense that the two women, though both from the same ethnic culture, were brought up according to very different principles. Dibor has been lead towards self-assertion and equality while Mossane has grown up to be submissive to her parents’ wishes. As a result, Dibor’s marriage appears relatively equal while Mossane’s impending marriage is set to be an unequal match because she will continue to have to submit to someone, although for other reasons. The difference in the women’s situations
shows that the patriarchal gender roles in this film are enforced by parents for their own purposes, rather than by the ethnic group as a societal norm.

It is crucial to emphasize here again that although arranged marriages do happen in Serer villages, they certainly are not the norm, and the film should not be seen as a generalizing illustration of this issue. There is a danger of seeing the film as a representation of a widespread reality, thus misunderstanding its overarching message of tolerance of an ethnically specific way of life. It seems easy to slip into the language of generalization, even if one’s overall intention is not to do so. When describing the plot of *Mossane*, Cynthia Marker (perhaps inadvertently) summarizes the film as ‘an indictment of a male-dominated tradition forcing African women to sacrifice love in arranged marriages that ensure their family’s economic well-being’ (2000: 465). While Marker’s comments are correct in identifying arranged marriage as a patriarchal imposition, her language suggests that arranged marriages are the norm for all African women and that the concept is entirely dysfunctional (i.e. love is sacrificed). While I do not defend the practice of forced marriage, I wish to suggest that reading *Mossane* as an outright criticism of arranged marriage may be taking a step too far. Not only does the film show other functioning couples whose marriages were likely arranged (Emery 2013: 52), it presents Mossane as an exceptional character. Her beauty is unprecedented and that is what gives her mother the idea to marry Mossane to a rich man without any regard to her daughter’s wishes. Again, this is an issue of representation, where problems present in the Serer reality are loaded with Faye’s representational strategy: the director shows, using narrative tropes deeply embedded in Serer culture, that any action limiting female freedom is an offense against the Serer deities and the values they symbolise. In that respect, *Mossane* should be viewed as a cautionary tale rather than a social issue film. Otherwise, we run the risk of condemning the Serer ethnic group for backward attitudes towards women, even though the film shows some female empowerment.

Rather than interpreting *Mossane* as a criticism of arranged marriages, the kinship system or ethnic customs, it might be more illuminating to see its plot as a
reflection of the widespread practices of clientelism under the neopatrimonial rule of the region’s governments. Clientelism, a form of patronage, has been a part of ethnic cultures of the region for centuries (Rashid 2006: 120) but after independence, patronage practices became more entwined with state politics and economy. Increasingly, politicians base their power on kinship ties and ethnic identities (Berman 1998: 306) gaining financial and political favours from their kinship and ethnic groups, who will in turn benefit from having a powerful connection in the government. These exchanges have led to the establishment of a neopatrimonial society which, according to Tripp, ‘lends itself to economic decision-making that reflects the pursuit of immediate self-enrichment at the expense of the public interest’ (2001: 38). It is this pursuit of self-enrichment and disregard for others that is reflected in the plot of Mossane. Mossane’s parents are keen to benefit financially from marrying Mossane to Diagoye, even though they both know Mossane objects to the choice and that she is likely to be unhappy in the marriage. And while at first it seems that the village will also benefit from Mossane’s marriage to Diagoye, when she dies it becomes clear how important she was to the village’s identity and that they will all regret approving the loveless marriage. Mirroring Arndt’s claims in the previous section of this chapter, Mossane makes a choice which elements of ethnic culture it deems as acceptable for women and which elements hinder female equality in this specific context. Therefore, the film can be interpreted as an African feminist criticism of the role of clientelism in the undermining of women’s status in their respective communities.

The film is also a pertinent reminder that it is mostly women who have been excluded from patronage but who have been bearing its effects. Tripp argues that because of gendered divisions of labour, gendered organizational modes and the general exclusion of women from political arenas, women have tended to have a different relationship to the state, to power, and to patronage. (2001: 35)
According to Tripp, this female relationship to patronage is not one of complete opposition; instead, women are beginning to challenge patronage in the areas where it leads to underrepresentation and discrimination of women as well as impoverishment of communities. It seems that due to the fact that patronage is historically a part of ethnic cultures, including the Serer, women are reluctant to reject the practice in its entirety. This is partly because patronage is so closely tied in with kinship, so it plays an important role in sustaining family members who are suffering financially or otherwise. In other words, it can in some cases be a life-saving resource for those who cannot rely on the state for help, as outlined in the previous chapter. The problems with patronage begin when it is used for more than sustenance, for instance when it becomes a means of oppressing ethnic and religious groups (Tripp 2001: 37), or in the case of Mossane, young women.

The women’s challenge to patronage and clientelistic practices is embodied by Mossane as she interrupts the ongoing wedding, to announce to the whole party that

si le mariage était une affaire de billets de banque, je me conformerais à votre choix. Je refuse d’être acculée par la meute. Personne ne m’a consultée.77

Mossane is pointing out the fact that the wedding, although conveyed as a traditional affair, is nothing more than a financial transaction to which she has not given consent. To this, her mother replies that she decides whom Mossane will marry, and if her choice is disrespected, she will put a curse on Mossane. This interaction between mother and daughter shows that patronage is not clearly divided along gender lines, since Mossane’s mother is shown to be the instigator of the arranged marriage, while the father plays a very minor role. What the scene also shows is that Mossane’s protest, even though it is heard by the wedding party, is swiftly dismissed by her father as a minor issue all families go through. This reveals how deeply incorporated patronage is into the kinship customs of the Serer, and

77‘If marriage was a matter of money, I would conform to your choice. I refuse to be cornered by the pack. Nobody consulted me’ (my translation from the French subtitles).
how internalized female subordination is, even in the mother character. Everyone appears to be aware that this wedding is based on a financial exchange but both the mother and the father still feel the need to justify it as something ‘traditional’.

In fact, during the wedding sequence, the role of money is emphasized, while the couple themselves and their relationship are barely mentioned. Not only is Mossane physically absent from the wedding celebration, her future and wellbeing are absent from the griot’s wishes and celebratory singing. What is mentioned, however, is how successful Diagoye is and how fortunate Mossane should consider herself for securing a marriage to him. It appears that for the griot and for those involved in the wedding, financial security of the groom guarantees the success of the marriage. As the couple is clearly not the focus of this wedding, the griot quickly moves on to celebrate the families themselves, and especially Mossane’s mother, who orchestrated the wedding. She, in turn, showers the griot with money, prompting him to sing the family more praise. Cash is the central motivation of this scene: it inspires the griot’s speech and his movement within the frame as he distributes a stack of banknotes to the wedding party. The camera moves with him, thus making the cash the sole focus of the scene. A brief shot of Mossane during this scene contradicts the atmosphere outside, as she sits with other young women in a darkened room, wrapped up in precious fabrics. The two shots are edited together repetitively to highlight the film’s condemnation of the way Mossane’s parents make financial gain from the objectification of their daughter.

The complex relationship between clientelism and gender can be traced back to the idea of male superiority and black female disposability imposed by the colonial regime. The gender hierarchy is, according to Niara Sudarkasa, an event in the history of Africa\textsuperscript{78} that has an ongoing impact on female emancipation. If we see gender hierarchy as a representation of historical/linear time, then the rift between historical time and monumental time mentioned by Kristeva (1981: 17) really begins to emerge in the above scenes of Mossane. The wedding forces Mossane to submit

\footnote{\textsuperscript{78} ‘Development of private property and capitalist market created the hierarchical statuses of male and female.’ (1986: 93)}
to the gender hierarchy, to the historical progression of female oppression, while giving up her freedom and her quest for education. Her wishes as the descendant of the Serer deity are ignored by her status-hungry parents who are eager to capitalize on their daughter’s perceived divine physical attractiveness. This is an imposition of the principles of historical time (clientelism) in order to control the female subjectivity that, in Mossane’s case, exists in monumental time. As she is a regeneration of a mythical beautiful woman, she moves within the parameters of monumental and cyclical time, where she is unbound by the historical perception of women. The monumental time is also, as mentioned previously, inhabited by the Serer deity and mythical creatures\(^79\) and as such serves as the locus of Serer ethnic identity. It is therefore not Mossane’s ethnic identity that imprisons her in the gender hierarchy, it is the ongoing impact of historical time.

Deleuze comes very close to agreeing with Kristeva on the issue of imposition of historical time onto women and particularly their bodies. When he theorizes the becoming-woman, Deleuze asserts that ‘the girl’s becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her’ (1988: 276). Without actually using the terms of monumental or cyclical time, Deleuze’s description of the girl’s existence as ‘an abstract line, or a line of flight’ (1988: 277) implies her existence outside the conventions of historical/linear time. Deleuze’s girl evades any classification in terms of gender, sex or age, and it can therefore exist freely in monumental time without being tied down into the gender hierarchy.

Yet, Deleuze’s concepts of the ‘girl’ and becoming-woman\(^80\) have come under criticism from a number of feminist authors, who have interpreted these concepts in representational terms. Their argument goes that, by using the term ‘girl’ to

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\(^79\) The film shows the two temporal spheres of historical and monumental time as coexisting within the film’s spatial setting. In the manner of a time-image, the mythical time spills into the historical time perceived by the villagers, as in the scene in which one of the boys looks up to witness the Pangools observing the situation in the village. Other mythical creatures are mentioned as present by the griot who introduces and concludes the film but they stay off-screen. Like in chapter one, it appears that the landscape enables the two temporal spheres to meet and connect the present to the mythical past.

\(^80\) ‘It is Age itself that is a becoming-child, just as Sexuality, any sexuality, is a becoming-woman, in other words, a girl’ (1987: 277).
reference sexuality, Deleuze is already, in some sense, imposing a historical narrative on the ‘girl’. He certainly is not the first theorist to make this connection, as evidenced by Sigmund Freud’s now famous proclamation in which he made a link between girls’ sexuality and the ‘dark continent’\(^8\) (1926). It seems that neither of the two men is able to draw a purely theoretical concept of sexuality without adhering to the patriarchal values of historical time. Crucially, it also means that the theorists struggle to think of a ‘girl’ or a woman without situating her in historical time, therefore stripping her of the possibility to join deity and exist in mythical time as an eternal being. The same happens to Mossane who, as a descendant of a Serer deity, is nevertheless trapped by the conventions developed in historical time by the patriarchal social order. This is particularly noticeable in the way that up until the point her parents start to talk about marriage, Mossane is respected by the villagers and greeted shyly by Sitor, her suitor. Once it is agreed that Mossane is old enough for marriage, she begins to be pursued by Sitor more aggressively and the villagers are talking about her behind her back. In other words, once she is perceived to be sexually available, she has to submit to the patriarchal conventions of arranged marriage and dowry.

Furthermore, Deleuze’s use of the term ‘girl’ to signal awakening sexuality has been linked with feminist criticism through Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of the ‘woman-child’ in *The Second Sex* (1997: 267). De Beauvoir is one of the few Western feminists whose ideas are adopted and built on by African feminist writers (Mwangi 2009: 242) and so her observations on the term ‘girl’ are certainly not irrelevant. De Beauvoir reports on women being seen as the ‘eternal children’, like black slaves or colonial natives, without much control over their lives and having to obey the laws established by other men (1997: 609). Feminist authors, such as gender scholar Catherine Driscoll, argue that this perception of women as children or girls seems to

\(^8\) Joan Raphael-Leff explains that the ‘dark continent’ in Freud’s writing is a manifestation of his lifelong obsession with Egyptian artefacts. For Freud, Egypt represents the ‘dark continent’, the untamed Africa with its enigmatic females and archaic prehistory of maternity (2007: 42). It is this connection with the primordial motherhood that Raphael-Leff sees as an inspiration for Freud’s link between the ‘dark continent’ and woman’s sexual desire; they both remain an enigmatic secret for him (2007: 50).
be mirrored in Deleuze’s use of the term ‘girl’, and raises questions about why the
girl remains eternal in its childhood, while ‘boy’ is merely a stage of life for Deleuze.
Driscoll also argues that ‘girl’ is a problematic concept

because neither women nor girls become the subject that
becoming-woman produces, an identity which is not an
outcome of a process but is that process itself. While
becoming-woman is not a reference to women, covering the
same terrains as ‘becoming-animal’, having been named as
woman and girl this line of flight continues to evoke the
‘minority’ aspects of women and girls. (2000: 75-76)

In other words, Driscoll suggests becoming-woman and ‘girl’ continue to insinuate
gender bias, despite the effort to make the terms cover some non-gendered areas.
Nevertheless, if Deleuze’s ‘girl’ is understood as a non-referential concept describing
a not-yet Oedipalised ‘child’, an unfixed entity, then the ‘girl’ is not necessarily
subject to the ‘minority’ status that Driscoll mentions, as the ‘girl’ does not possess
the physical (and therefore referential) aspects of a female child.

If ‘girl’ is intended to be a non-referential term by Deleuze, then it is possible to
read Mossane as a ‘girl’ whose becoming-woman has been stolen from her. Deleuze
distinguishes between two conceptions of a woman, molar and molecular. While
molar woman is ‘the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and
functions and assigned as a subject’ (1988: 275), molecular woman is a far more
abstract being that occupies both the actual and the virtual planes. In that sense,
becoming-woman can be theorized as

not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting
particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or
the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words,
that produce in us a molecular woman. (1988: 275)

The molecular woman is thus not tied to flesh, though she has impact on it. As a
molecular woman, she is constantly in flux, always freely becoming. This is what the

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82 African feminists would particularly disagree with the association of women with ‘minority’, since
African feminisms place a lot of value on women as the centres of social organization.
83 For a more detailed analysis of the gender bias of becoming-woman, see Grosz (1993: 177-9)

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film implies is Mossane’s fate as a regeneration of a mythical ‘beauty’, but it has been taken away from her by her parent’s intention to marry her for profit. In fact, the film hints quite heavily at Mossane’s molecular nature by portraying Mossane as having an affinity with water and the river, and growing frustrated with land. The first time Mossane appears in the film, and at her happiest, is when she bathes in the river. After that, whenever she seeks peace, she is found in the presence of water (looking at her reflection in the well, letting her body get wet in the rain). On the other hand, when she can’t cope with her frustration, she buries her hands in the barren soil and calls on her ancestors to free her. Her freedom comes eventually, when her body is found on the riverbank. It seems that Mossane desires to be in flux, to become more than her body, to become the molecular woman. Through the presence of the Pangools in her vicinity, the film signals that the virtual plane, the universe of her ancestors (see next chapter), is accessible to her but not in her current situation as a molar woman.

Regarding the molecular female bodies, Mossane makes a strong visual statement about their objectification. The film depicts female nudity as a natural occurrence, rather than an object of male pleasure as defined by Mulvey, by showing multiple female characters washing their bodies. In these scenes, the focus is on the process of washing as the camera lingers on the wet black skin, instead of any body parts, and the light being reflected off it. This way of representing black female bodies shows, according to Thackway, that ‘men and the male gaze are also completely absent’ (2006: 155) because the camera is not an extension of a male character’s point of view. The importance of representing female bodies in the absence of a male gaze lies in the defying effect it has over patriarchy, as it is summarized here by literary scholar Chielozona Eze:

the truth is that the fundamental assumption of patriarchy raises the question of whether women’s bodies really belong to them because it assumes that women’s bodies belong to society, i.e., men. (2014: 92)
In *Mossane*, the female characters certainly are in control of their bodies, deciding when they want to be naked and looked at (such as when Dibor is intimate with her husband) and when they prefer privacy (Mossane washing her mother’s back). Even at these instances, the point of view never belongs to a male character. By showing female bodies without the male gaze, Faye disassociates these bodies from the patriarchal society which seeks to possess them, and in the case of Mossane, to profit from them.

Finally, the film offers an ambiguous ending that can be interpreted as either drawing on Serer mythology to show that Mossane chooses her own fate, or as a punishment for disobeying her parents. While seeing Mossane’s death as a punishment for her revolt against her parents would mean a reaffirmation of patriarchal gender roles, understanding her death as a matter of her own choice, though still problematic, would draw attention to disparate treatment of women in Serer mythology and in reality. This reading underlines the consistent message of the film about Mossane’s perceived value as a gift from the god until this value is subjected to clientelistic practices. The actual scene of Mossane’s death is filmed in darkness with the moon providing minimal lighting, depicting Mossane jumping into a boat, pushing it away from the shore and then curling up on the floor of the boat. The boat floats off screen and Mossane screams. Interestingly, the scene is shot from a high angle that is unlike any other angle in the film, suggesting that there is indeed some form of deity looking over Mossane’s departure. Her being taken back by the Serer god would create a full circle from the beginning of the film, when she first appears emerging from the river in the presence of the Pangools. Nevertheless, apart from this connection with the beginning and the unusual high angle, there is very little evidence to declare Mossane’s death to be unambiguously a divine occurrence or a punishment. This way, *Mossane* provokes more thought about the role of cultural context in the feminist interpretations of the film.

Mossane gives us a female character that is not only deeply rooted in her ethnic group but also a part of its mythology, and then proceeds to show the effects of kinship politics and clientelism on the deterioration of her status. In many ways, the
film is as critical of the negative aspects of kinship as *Aujourd’hui*, though in this case the criticism comes from an African feminist perspective. Understanding that African feminisms put a lot of emphasis on the role of women in the pre-colonial past is crucial for seeing the significance of Mossane occupying two temporal spheres, one mythical and one historical. The maltreatment that the protagonist undergoes in historical time coincides with African feminists’ view on the historical deterioration of women’s status in Francophone West Africa. The next film carries on with the critical assessment of the role of kinship in women’s lives but it also inspires a debate about the place and shape of feminism in the various aspects of the protagonist’s life, not least her religious affiliation.

### 3.3 Djanta: communicating African feminisms and networks of female solidarity

*Djanta* is a film of subtle style, set in a college in Burkina Faso’s capital Ouagadougou as well as in a Mossi village in the countryside. Through Djanta’s (Sandra Soubeiga) dialogue with her tutor, a Catholic missionary, it is revealed that Djanta’s father (Ousséni Dermé) was persuaded by the tutor to let Djanta attend a college in town. Now that Djanta’s education is almost over, her tutor urges her to go back to her village and hear out her father’s wishes before she makes a decision about her future. It seems that up until now, Djanta has perceived her affiliation with the Catholic priest as an opportunity for her own empowerment. Yet, since her permission to leave for the city was based on the condition that she come back and marry, it can be argued that her tutor merely gave her the illusion of having a choice in the future. When Djanta returns to the village, her status as a young unwedded woman remains the same, and she still has to obey her father’s decision about her future husband. From that point of view, it looks as if the Catholic tutor’s attempt to give Djanta a better chance at her future failed as it was not aimed at also changing her father’s attitude towards education of women. By showing that the Catholic tutor does not challenge the patriarchal order in the village, the film introduces its main message that women have very little systemic support from religion, education or kinship to fight against their oppression by men.
The men in Djanta’s village prefer polygamy, which is reflected in the lack of decision power Djanta’s mother (Blandine Yaméogo), a second wife, has over Djanta’s marriage. In Mossane, the mother was the main instigator of Mossane’s arranged marriage but in this film, the female protagonist’s mother has far less power and privilege because she is one of a number of wives. It seems that Djanta’s mother sincerely wants the best for her daughter. However, she fears opposing her husband, so she at least tries to make Djanta understand why her father demands her to marry. In addition to Djanta’s future, her mother is also worried about the fate that would befall her and her younger daughter if Djanta chose not to conform to her father’s wishes. The father in this film is the one in control of his family and makes all the decisions on behalf of his wives and daughters without any regard towards their wishes. His sovereignty is even apparent from the layout of Djanta’s home: her father’s hut is the largest in the unit, surrounded by the smaller units of his wives. There is a clear hierarchy in the family and the father is on its top. Incidentally, Djanta’s mother is played by the same actress as Napoko in Delwende (also set in a Mossi village) and like Napoko, Djanta’s mother is threatened into submission by her husband if she dares to protest. The role of the patriarch is therefore represented as deeply problematic in both of the Mossi films.

The two main female characters, Djanta and her mother, can to some extent be seen as symbolic of the different approaches to African feminism. Djanta’s mother acts as an agent of unity between Djanta and her father, something Aili Mari Tripp sees as a crucial strength of the women’s movements in the region (2001: 37). Women’s unity across ethnic, religious and lineage affiliations provides African women with the possibility to challenge the men’s clientelism that often treats them as a currency in exchange for political and economic favours. Although Djanta’s mother does not reject clientelism, she seems to see the value in both Djanta’s education and her father’s traditional attitudes. She aims to explain her husband’s behaviour to Djanta, hoping that Djanta becomes less angry and negotiates with her father:

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84 The Mossi are largely polygamous (Ouédraogo 1951: 46).
Nevertheless, in the case of Djanta’s mother, the unity she wants between her husband and Djanta in order to protect herself and her daughters, is only a short-term solution. Even though she manages to rally Djanta and her aunt Koro (Koro Yaméogo) to persuade Djanta’s father to give her time to finish the semester at the college, she only postpones Djanta’s submission to her father’s wishes. The fact that Djanta’s mother dies hours before Djanta does, provokes a question regarding the film’s message about the fate of the women’s movements’ work towards unity. The film seems to suggest that there is value in the women’s fight for unity against clientelism, but only when it is combined with the fight for general gender equality. Djanta’s mother’s last words are ‘Il n’y a plus rien à faire. Lève-toi et enfuie-toi!’ which might suggest that she has given up on the possibility of uniting Djanta and her father, but the wording of her response, ‘Get up and run away!’ can also mean that she now believes that Djanta is strong enough to fight for gender equality.

As opposed to her mother, Djanta stands for a more combative and outspoken side of African feminism. She is not only against the practice of clientelism that brought about her ordeal; she is actively seeking to publicize the society’s need for gender equality in her book. Djanta refuses to marry the man her father chose not because she does not like him, but because she rejects the idea of being ‘promised’ to another man, as if she is the currency in the men’s deal. Her action is a criticism of using kinship to curry political or economic favour between men, thus keeping women in an inferior position. Since she is the first woman in the village to get a

85 ‘Djanta, understand your father.’, ‘Understand? A father that wants his daughter’s death…’, ‘He does not want your death, just that you respect the tradition. Your father wants to respect his promise to Baldé.’ (my translation from the French subtitles) This is a transcription of the French subtitles available for the film, and so the original dialogue in Mossi language may not be of the same wording. However, as this version with French subtitles is currently the only available one, and therefore it has been watched by most of the film’s audience, I am using the French subtitles to support my argument about the message of the film.

86 ‘There is nothing more to do. Get up and run away!’
college education, she is able to see beyond the clientelistic practices as guarantees of women’s survival and she discovers that these practices are often used by men to subdue women and deny them equality. This is visible in the relationship Djanta’s mother has with her husband, when she and her younger daughter depend on him for survival in the village and she, in turn, obeys his orders. Djanta, on the other hand, has gained independence from kinship as survival due to her education. Having realised that education can help girls like her, Djanta decides to write a book that would spread awareness of the gender inequality in her village. Inspired to write after reading de Beauvoir, Djanta represents the branch of African feminism that acknowledges some of the influence of Western feminism (i.e. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) and prioritizes gender equality above kinship or race, but recognizes their significance. In other words, Djanta’s character is a response to Africana Womanism and its limited application to the situation in this region. The centrality of family, which is crucial to Africana Womanism, is in fact part of the problem in Djanta, as the men seem to take advantage of family ties to maintain their superior roles in the village.

Despite the dominance of men in the village, one woman, Djanta’s aunt Koro, seems to have the respect of the men and her opinions are held in high regard by all of the villagers. The film does not reveal what is the reason behind Koro’s respect in the village but she is nevertheless depicted as a powerful woman who manages to change Djanta’s father’s mind to let her return to school for one more semester. It is unusual that the village’s most respected woman is a middle-aged, and the fact that we do not know the cause of her prestigious position among the men makes her an intriguing anomaly. She only appears in the frame with other women and never with men, and refers to Djanta as ‘also her daughter’. Koro reminds Djanta that she has already fought for her going to school once, so she must have her best interests at heart. It seems that Koro could be an embodiment of those types of African feminisms that propose negotiation of ethnic cultural and social norms that empower women in their roles within their communities. Specifically, her negotiations with Djanta’s father are in the spirit of reconciliation of the genders,
seeking benefit for Djanta while also pleasing her father’s and her fiancée’s wishes. The character of Koro suggests that it is possible for certain types of African feminisms to have a positive effect on the patriarchal order of the village.

The strength of Koro’s and Djanta’s characters and their close bond indicates a possibility of using kinship to benefit women as well as men, thus levelling the kinship gap in the fight for gender equality. This point relates back to Harrow’s description of African feminism in film as the characters’ effort to ‘join the male club’ rather than distort the current order. The bond between Djanta and Koro suggests that some of the male strategies of using kinship to gain political or economic alliances could also be practised by women. As a well-positioned woman, Koro can protect Djanta from the wrath of her father and she can negotiate with him as an equal. The solidarity between the two women is undeniable but what hinders the success of their mission is that they still operate within a patriarchal order. Koro insists that Djanta marries when she completes the semester at her college, which shows that despite Koro’s willingness to circumnavigate Djanta’s father’s authority, she has already internalized a patriarchal attitude towards marriage. Koro says Djanta’s fiancée now has a say in Djanta’s life and although Djanta has actively pursued her own future plans, she should find her future ‘not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master’ (de Beauvoir 1997: 352). De Beauvoir, whom Djanta later quotes in the film as her influence, summarizes the patriarchal outlook in which women, despite their mutual support for each other, do not see each other as masters of their own lives but merely as ornaments in male lives. Koro claims that Baldé is a lucky man because Djanta is so educated; she does not give Djanta’s education the credit of being for her own good. In that sense, the film is clear in its message that in order for kinship to become beneficial to women as well as men, there needs to be a change in the perception of women as dependent on men for income.

Apart from demanding a change in kinship strategies, the film further shows the importance of connecting African feminisms with ethnic cultures when Djanta combines her spiritual beliefs with her fight for female emancipation. Djanta
reconciles what she calls her ‘roots’ with the knowledge and confidence she found at the ‘school of whites’, in order to fight against her inferior position towards her father as well as the general oppression of women in her community. Although she has been receiving education in the city for some time, Djanta does not reject any of the customary practices of the women in her village. For instance, when she asks her aunt Koro to support her cause against her father, Koro suggests that they seek advice from cowrie shells. Divination through the use of cowrie shells is an ancient practice in the Mande cultural zone (Pemberton in La Gamma 2000: 11) and its specificities form a part of the ethnic cultures in the region. When Koro reads the cowrie shells as saying that Djanta will not marry in the village, Djanta readily believes her claim and seems very pleased about it (See Figure 8). She does not question the practice or distance herself from it because she has been exposed to a science-centric environment of the school. Djanta seems to give both sources of knowledge, her culture and her education, equal amount of enthusiasm and acceptance, using both to form her own identity as a woman and a member of her

Figure 8: Koro reads Djanta’s future in cowrie shells

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87 The interpretation of the role of divination in this film is a sensitive issue that ought to be addressed. Although I have referenced Pemberton’s essay on African divination in LaGamma’s exhibition catalogue, I am aware that their use of rationalization of sacred African divination practices and objects is very problematic. On the same topic, Western viewers might find it problematic, from the point of view of feminism, that Djanta believes in the results of a cowrie shell divination, since beliefs, monotheistic or other, tend to be seen as a tool in the oppression of women. By the same token, however, the Western belief in rational explanation may be oppressive to those cultures and ethnicities with differing views, especially since rational explanations of ethnic beliefs can be interpreted as extensions of Western ‘superiority’ over ‘primitive’ societies. Therefore, deriding Djanta’s belief in divination would also mean deriding her identity as a Mossi, and because being ethnically Mossi is a crucial part of her female identity, it would mean degrading her as a woman too.
ethnic group. In that sense, her identity is closely linked to her ethnicity but it is not entirely defined by it, leaving space for other influences.

Djanta is shocked to find however, that there is a discrepancy between the way ‘African’ women in general are thought of and presented as, and the reality of women in her village. In one of her lectures, Djanta listens to her tutor introduce the concept of négritude and cite the first lines of Senghor’s poem Black Woman (Irele 1977: 44). The naked black woman in the poem is described as beautiful due to her colour and shape, and likened to an African landscape. At first, Djanta seems ambivalent to this notion but when she comes back from her village, having been engaged without her consent, Djanta begins to dismantle this simplistic vision of black women in her creative writing assignment. She criticises the fact that black women are celebrated for their beauty but nobody mentions that some village women are not able to choose the life they want, thus becoming the receptacles of patriarchy.

However, Djanta realizes that she is arguing for the emancipation of women in two environments with very different sets of values. At the school, she is celebrated by her friends and lecturers for being brave and outspoken about the problems ‘African’ women face in modern times. She works hard to express her ideas in writing and enters her work to a national literary competition. Her behaviour and accomplishments are accepted because they are exactly the type of behaviour expected from a woman, or a man for that matter, in the academic environment. Being brave and outspoken at school is accepted by others and eventually becomes a part of Djanta’s identity in this environment. Yet, as an outspoken woman in her village, Djanta is threatened with death by her father for disrespecting the patriarchal social order. Furthermore, the values of the women in the village revolve around supplying drinking water, food and wood to their families rather than any self-improvement. When they appear on screen, female characters are always in groups doing one of their many chores, while Djanta usually shares the frame with her little sister Noura or is completely alone. It seems that the women in the village

88 ‘Femme nue, femme noire/ Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme/ qui est beauté’
place value on collectivism and cooperation, while Djanta leans towards individual and intellectual labour, thus making her an outsider in the village. This shows that there is a large gap between the emancipation Djanta can have in the city and the empowerment that the women in the village need. The film presents Djanta as unable to actually make a change for the women in the village herself because they consider her an outsider, she can only bring more attention to the village women’s cause. Each of the women in the two different environments thus have their differing perspectives which illustrate the numerous perspectives of African feminisms.

By contrasting the values of the village women with Djanta’s own values, the film draws attention to the demand for African feminisms that take into account the varying needs of ‘African’ women. Djanta goes through a process of noticing the flaws of Senghor’s poem about the beauty of black women, to understanding her own privilege of attaining college education, to realizing that her own feminist empowerment only has a limited application to the women in the village. In this way, the film argues against an indiscriminate use of one brand of African feminism in analysing the representation of a situation that is clearly far more complex. While de Beauvoir’s writings may strongly influence Djanta, de Beauvoir’s feminism is unlikely to find any traction among the women in the village. This is due to the fact that, as Africanist and gender scholar Signe Arnfred explains,

women’s work is nothing but repetition and stagnation, not interesting at all from de Beauvoir’s point of view; motherhood is naturalized and trivialized, a passive submission to nature and biology. This is motherhood as seen by (European) men; not motherhood as seen by (African) women. (2011: 108)

Yet, for the women in Djanta’s village, motherhood is crucial to their identity and it is what gives them the most authority women in that situation can have. Therefore, the representation of these female characters ought to be analysed from feminist perspectives that do not take de Beauvoir as its starting point, which includes some brands of African feminism. In the context of the film’s setting in a Mossi village,
where collectivism and kinship seem to be a matter of survival, motherhood should not be the centre of feminist criticism.

*Djanta*, like *Delwende*, highlights the strong bonds between the female characters in the film and presents them as a necessity for the women’s survival and good social status. The film presents the closeness between the female characters as the only thing that keeps women safe and away from physical harm by the men. In the village, Djanta’s only allies are her mother, Noura and her aunt Koro and together they manage to keep Djanta from being punished by her father for refusing to marry. Yet, when her mother is injured, Djanta loses her last chance of protection and it is not long until she is fatally harmed by her father. In this way, the film hints at a network of solidarity among the women in Djanta’s environment that functions as a fragile alternative to the kinship-based social hierarchy that tends to oppress women. In the city, Djanta also has a support network of women led by her best friend, who makes sure Djanta’s manuscript is entered into the national competition and then goes looking for Djanta after she goes back to her village. By not having Djanta’s college boyfriend do the above, the film points out that men are not a reliable source of protection and solidarity for the protagonist, they either seek to benefit from her or to cause her pain. This is quite a powerful feminist statement which, although indirectly, celebrates the role of women’s organisations working against the divisiveness of patriarchal societies. Djanta’s female solidarity network also supports her across the rural and urban settings of the film, demonstrating its necessity in all aspects of Djanta’s existence.

Finally, the film addresses how female characters from both the city and the village change in the aftermath of Djanta’s ordeal, proposing that there is a scope for a feminist cooperation between women in diverse social contexts. Djanta’s best friend from the college comes back to her village to give Noura Djanta’s published novel. As she passes the book to Noura, they both hold it in the centre of the frame and Noura replies that after what has happened with Djanta, the elders of the village have decided to give their daughters the freedom to marry whom they wish. The fact that in this scene the book is connected with the news about the
daughters’ freedom signals a symbolic connection between Djanta’s feminist literary activism in the city and the growing awareness of women’s rights outside the metropolitan areas. Djanta’s connective effect is further emphasized by her instruction to her friend to enroll Noura in school. Although the sorrowful non-diegetic soundtrack to the scene sets a rather melancholic tone, indicating Noura’s grief, the implications of the dialogue are a cause for some celebration. Djanta’s legacy is to raise awareness of the maltreatment of women in her village but also to inspire a new generation of girls to seek education. The last shot of the scene with Noura running with the book from Djanta’s friend on the left side of the frame towards her mother on the right illustrates a future female cooperation enabled by Djanta’s book. The shot can be considered a call to arms for women to cooperate across their differences in status.

Even though *Djanta* uses an understated style to narrate the story of its protagonist, it communicates an urgent African feminist statement of cooperation. Initially, it appears as if Djanta has very little power or support in her resistance against an arranged marriage but the film unveils a network of female solidarity that operates around the male-dominated social hierarchy. The support she receives from other female characters allows Djanta to develop her feminist stance and incorporate it into her book, with which she aims to raise awareness of the village women’s experience, thus connecting the network of solidarity even more closely. Additionally, *Djanta* foregrounds the fact that, rather than uniting around one type of African feminism, the women in the film can cooperate while relating to a range of African feminisms. The diversity of African feminisms and their relation to ethnic identities is a theme that also runs through the next and final film in this chapter, *Taafe Fanga*. This film parodies the assumption that feminism’s main goal is to switch the gender roles and social hierarchy in favour of women and in the process offers a commentary on the centrality of motherhood to a number of African feminisms.
3.4 *Taafe Fanga* and the problem of associating a patriarchal social order with ethnic identities

Out of the three films in this chapter, *Taafe Fanga* addresses women’s inequality most straightforwardly. This 1997 comedy, set in an 18th century Dogon village, takes its inspiration from Dogon myths and uses them to highlight the imbalance of power between men and women in a Dogon village. When a young woman claims her right to sit in the men’s section of a *griot*’s audience, the *griot* begins to tell a story about a village in which women were increasingly frustrated with their husbands for not appreciating their hard work at home. One of the women, Yayémé (Fanta Berete), decides to take matters into her own hands, after she stumbles upon what she believes is an evil spirit, who is in fact a disfigured woman, and steals her mask. She then uses this mask to force the men in the village to switch their roles with their wives, but she and her friends soon realize that merely switching the gender roles does not solve any problems. The whole village then unites in prayer for a woman giving birth, in what is a reinstatement of the centrality of motherhood in many brands of African feminism. Yet, an uncertainty about the peace between men and women hangs in the air, as a female *griot* announces that once women have tasted freedom, they will fight to get it back.

The Dogon belief in an unquestionable difference between men and women (Imbo 2002: 85) becomes a significant theme, both in terms of the style of the film and in its feminist narrative. It seems that the village consists of two separate worlds, meant to balance each other out. Female spaces, including the home and the women’s house,89 are bordered by high walls and divided into smaller sections, eliciting a feeling of exclusion and even claustrophobia. On the other hand, the men’s space is unlimited by walls, it includes the home as well as the public space outside, where the men are often seen congregating. Despite the apparent balance between male and female spaces and roles in the village, there is a growing frustration on the side of the women, who feel that their workload in the home

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89 ‘Women stay here during menstruation because their blood is perceived as impure. As a polluting element, it affects water as well as the power of magic and ritual objects.’ (Douny 2014: 77)
exceeds that of the men outside, who are mostly depicted resting in the shade. Unlike in Mossane, where women had at least a little say within the domestic space, in Taafe Fanga women occupy the position of house slaves while the domestic space has become more like a prison than a shelter. Women are literally at the bottom of the hierarchy, illustrated by the fact that the wives stay within the lower register of the frame, crouching while tending to the fire or milling flour. It becomes clear that the purpose for which this division between male and female spaces was created is no longer justified, because it seems to be overwhelmingly in favour of men and their freedom.

Nevertheless, the film does not instigate a rejection of Dogon beliefs and traditions based on the fact that they make it possible for men to oppress women. Instead, the film berates the men for taking so much advantage of a system that already benefits them more than it does women. This is first noticeable in the griot’s introduction to the story of the Dogon village, when he claims that it was ‘a world made by men for men’. Yet, the men in the story are not presented as overly strong or authoritative, which would perhaps confirm to the griot’s listeners the appropriateness of a gender bias in the past. They are, despite their attempt at being strict with the women, shown as cowards who represent a parody of the patriarchal ideas of masculinity and they are comedic to such extent that they make the viewer question how they could maintain the patriarchal order in the village in the first place. The parodying nature of the sequence in which men are seen performing the duties of their wives combined with their farcical, frantic acting highlights this notion of the patriarchy being founded on a very unstable ground. The men uphold the patriarchy out of comfort, rather than there being any cultural or religious reason why things should be the way they are.

Upon further thought, the structure of the film itself suggests that patriarchal attitudes are not directly linked to ethnic identities. The film begins in the present day with the griot, who is inspired by a woman challenging the male audience members, to tell a story from the past about women challenging the patriarchal order. A similar structure was used by Dani Kouyaté in Keita, in which he interwoven
the past and the present to show what I argued was a continued presence of the past in ethnic identities of the Mande peoples. I used the Deleuzian concept of non-linear time to illustrate how Mande ethnic identity is represented in film as a constant twisting of the present and the past in a conceptual dimension that, based on Kristeva, could be seen as monumental time. As opposed to this monumental time, in which ethnic identity develops, historical time, or linear time in Deleuzian terminology, is the temporal dimension which gave rise to patriarchal attitudes. These patriarchal attitudes include those that *Taafe Fanga* shows as being created by men to retain their comfortable positions as well as the clientelist practices in *Mossane* and *Djanta*.

Crucially, however, it is de Beauvoir\(^\text{90}\) who writes that women are trapped in historical/linear time by patriarchal attitudes. The patriarchal order attaches women to a constant repetition of historical past, in particular to the antiquated gender roles, in order to prevent them from having any aspirations for the future. De Beauvoir points out that

> it is easy to see why woman clings to routine; time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past. (1997: 610)

It is this cyclicality in women’s lives that is critiqued in the scene in *Taafe Fanga*, in which the woman in a red dress challenges the prejudices of the male audience members, prompting the *griot* to remind the men about the ‘battle of the sexes’ set in the Dogon mythical history. She enters the room with a purpose, disrupting the gender separation between the *griot*’s audience by sitting with the men and disregarding their verbal abuse. Her challenge of the gender rules in this room is obvious. She does not pretend to be a man by making herself look like one; she is wearing a figure-hugging red dress and a lipstick of the same colour, playing up her femininity. Yet, she refuses to follow the cyclicality of rules set out for women by men, in this case sitting in one corner of the room, on the floor. Like the Dogon

\(^{90}\) Though the film eventually disagrees with de Beauvoir’s negative stance on motherhood, it shares her critique of repetitive time in women’s gender role.
women in the story she requests from the *griot*, she frees herself from the dictatorship of historical time upheld by the men in the room and promotes the idea of equality through difference.

The film highlights the fact that for the Dogon women, it is impossible to challenge the men’s patriarchal behaviour without threatening them with a mythical creature that does not exist in the linear temporal plane. Yayémé is unhappy because her husband, after a couple of men call him ‘a woman’s slave’ for bringing wood to her, beats Yayémé and tells her that there needs to be a clear hierarchy because that is how it is meant to be. In order to make her husband and the other men understand just how much work women do at home, Yayémé puts on a mask she stole, pretending to be one of the gods, and orders the village men to switch duties with women. By doing this, Yayémé attacks her husband’s logic that the gender roles in the village exist because of some naturally-given social order. Her claiming the role of a creature that transcends linear time, which has been used by men to subject women to cyclical time as de Beauvoir calls it, threatens the men’s version of history.

However, once the men take on the women’s duties at home, and the women dressed as men spend their days sleeping and socializing, the inequality between the genders remains, though now in reverse (see Figure 9). In fact, this return to inequality after the gender norms have been exchanged can be interpreted as a dramatization of the argument most often used against feminism. This argument,

![Figure 9 Gender role reversal in Taafe Fanga](image)
with some variations, mires the fight for female empowerment in Francophone West Africa as well as the West, and it paints an image of a future where women have taken all the power away from men and treat them as less than equals. It is the complete opposite of what Tripp expressed as the aim of women’s organizations in Africa because this scenario copies rather than subverts the corruption and patronage politics of patriarchal governance. Eventually, the women realize that the whole social hierarchy of the village needs to be challenged rather than reversed, after witnessing the men’s suffering and a pregnant woman admitting she cannot be the man anymore because she needs medical attention. By showing how the switching of gender roles would not improve gender equality, *Taafe Fanga* rejects the arguments against African women’s organizations and promotes African feminism that negotiates the social hierarchies of ethnic cultures.

Thackway proposes that the film’s ultimate argument is ‘that there will always be losers as long as the structures of domination and submission remain unchallenged’ and that women’s emancipation ‘needs to be founded on a lasting modification of power relations’ (2006: 168). Since the women of the village do not subvert these structures but merely replicate them, they are bound to lose this battle. However, rather than simply showing the women’s mistake in adopting the patriarchal social order, and thus risking adopting a castigating tone towards the women, the film offers a subtle vision of an alternative social order based on equality and compassion. The evidence for this can be found in the relationship that develops between Yayémé’s daughter and the woman whose mask Yayémé steals at the beginning of the film. The woman has a badly scarred face and tells the little girl about her ordeal being cast out of her village for her deformity. Instead of running away, as the woman expects her to, the little girl applies a layer of herbs and leaves to the woman’s face, which soon entirely heals her scarring. With her face in order, the woman feels empowered to confront Yayémé about her stolen mask and the people in her village about their treatment of her. Both female characters grow demonstratively stronger through this interaction in which compassion and care become the symbol of female agency. The sequence acts as a contrast to the
women’s claiming and maintaining of power through deception and oppression, thus ensuring the film is more than a moralizing tale about women’s futile attempt at equality. So, to modify Thackway’s statement, *Taafe Fanga* shows that African feminisms argue for more than just ‘joining the men’s club’ as Harrow put it; the film demands a structural change in power relations.

Finally, *Taafe Fanga* puts emphasis on the centrality of motherhood in the Dogon women’s lives but also on its importance for the village life and the ethnic groups’ culture. It is the birth of a child that stops an impending violent clash between the angry men and empowered women. The birth takes place in a hut at the top of a small hill, and this hut is at the centre of a long shot encompassing all the men and women at the bottom of the hill. As the new mother and child are announced to be alive and well, the villagers who all face away from the camera and towards the hut bow their heads. This long shot that draws the attention towards the hut in the centre of the frame symbolizes how motherhood is at the core of the life in the village, regardless of which gender holds more power. Moreover, the film includes an animated sequence about motherhood that stands apart from the rest of the film in terms of style. The sequence is a story narrated by one of the female characters, about how Dogon mothers in the mythical past used to pluck stars out of the sky and give them to their children to play with and return back to the sky when they become bored. The same children’s story is described by anthropologist Enid Schildkrout who interprets it as an expression of the Dogon belief that mothers and children are in charge of the cosmos, while

much of Dogon ritual, especially masking, is aimed at countervailing this feminist and child-centered perspective. The stars – the secrets of the universe – inevitably get taken over by the men. (2004: 49)

The story and its inclusion in *Taafe Fanga* highlights an ongoing fight for power balance between the genders as well as the notion that motherhood is at the forefront of the feminist cultural narrative among the Dogon. This film thus also represents the fact that the fight for gender equality is an integral part of Dogon
ethnic identities, so any claims that Dogon ethnic culture and patriarchy are inherently linked are problematic.

_Taafe Fanga_ challenges the association between ethnic identities and patriarchy by narrating a story that roots feminist resistance to oppressive social hierarchies in the mythical past of the Dogon ethnic group. It uses the same narrative strategy of inserting the past into the present as _Keita_ and _Guimba do_, in order to represent the continuing relevance of ethnic identities in Francophone West African film. However, in this instance, the non-linear structure of the film highlights the perpetual significance of the Dogon feminist cultural narrative to the feminist efforts in this region nowadays. Additionally, _Taafe Fanga_ marks motherhood as the fundamental source of power and respect for the Dogon women on screen, aligning itself with the branches of African feminism that reject de Beauvoir and Western feminisms. In that sense, _Taafe Fanga_, _Djanta_ and _Mossane_ can all be seen as necessitating a feminist analysis which is sensitive to the films’ cultural context.

Based on my analysis of the three films above, I conclude that the films’ representation of the relationship between gender and patriarchal attitudes is far more complex than it initially appears. All of the films seem to show that the male protagonists’ ethnic identity has at least in some sense contributed to their patriarchal attitudes but the two are not directly related. There are other influences in these films that seem to suggest that patriarchal attitudes are the result of a complicated historical process. For instance, it might look like arranged marriage is a significant part of ethnic identity in the first two films. Upon closer inspection and further research, however, the films reveal that arranged marriage is a disguised practice of clientelism that takes advantage of ethnic cultures. What all three films confirm is that the patriarchal order, although perhaps initially connected to ethnic cultures and identities, has now taken ethnic identity hostage and uses it as a means to justify its actions.

Throughout the chapter, it also became apparent that some Western feminisms, including those addressing the intersection of race and gender in the West, are not
applicable as theoretical frameworks in the analysis of the above films. Although these feminisms, such as Africana Womanism or intersectional feminism, offer useful debates regarding the impact of the intersection of different forms of identities, they remain rooted in Western sociological perceptions. In other words, these feminisms do not take into account the concepts significant to women represented in the above films, such as ethnic identity, kinship, and spiritual beliefs. Other forms of African feminism, those that approach patriarchal social hierarchies through negotiation, appear to be much more popular in the representations of the issues female characters face on screen. This is a reflection of how strong the link between ethnic and gender identities remains.

In this chapter, the films and their interpretation of African feminisms foreground the intersectional nature of identity and its representations. In order to fully acknowledge this fact, the next chapter looks at how representations of each form of identity discussed in the previous three chapters intersect with representations of spiritual and religious identities. Due to the widespread belief in the presence of ancestors and spirits in the everyday reality of the region, spirituality and religion are an underlying influence on all forms of identity.
Chapter Four

Representations of Spiritual and Religious Identities: Intersections with Ethnicity, Kinship and Gender

As part of the promotion for his first feature film, Mansour Sora Wade, the director of Ndeysaan (2001), admitted:

My concern was to show ordinary life and the supernatural existing together, without ostentation in a very simple manner, as it was the case in my childhood, showing that belief and pragmatism co-exist naturally. (California Newsreel no date)

In revealing the perception of the supernatural as a matter of everyday occurrence, the director also implies that spirituality permeated his identity as a child. In other words, as Sora Wade was developing his identity as a member of his ethnic group as well as a descendant of his family lineage, and adapting to the gender roles expected of a man in Lebou society, his spiritual beliefs became an inseparable part of this process of identification. As a film director, Sora Wade then translated what he felt was the influence of spirituality on identity to his film Ndeysaan, in which spiritual beliefs directly affect the protagonists’ ethnic, kinship and gender identities. Thackway sees the use of spiritual beliefs as a common practice by ‘African’ filmmakers wishing to subvert the Eurocentric legacies of colonial representations of Africa (2006: 37). The two ideas of the supernatural being a part of reality, and of spirituality affecting other aspects of identity will significantly inform my analysis of the representation of spiritual/religious identities in the two films.

In order to better illustrate the links between the representations of spirituality, religion and other identities, this chapter will be organized into three distinct
sections. In departure from the structure of the previous chapters, each section will focus on the depiction of the relationship between spiritual beliefs and another form of identity, i.e. ethnicity, kinship and gender, respectively. This structure will allow a more insightful examination of the intersectional and fluid nature of identity representation in the films below. The chapter will revisit some of the points made previously in the thesis, in order to draw more links between identities and thus presenting a more rounded discussion of identity representation. This structure also mirrors the fact that spirituality is a substantial theme in Francophone West African cinemas, affecting all aspects of the characters’ existence. In each part of the chapter, the links between spirituality/religious identities and other identities will be explored with reference to two films: Ndeysaan, as mentioned above, and Timbuktu.

My two main aims in this chapter will be to determine the ways in which representations of spirituality/religious identities affect representations of other aspects of identity, as well as to analyse the way spirituality/religious identities are represented in the two films below. As in the previous chapters, part of the theoretical framework in this chapter relies on the application of Deleuzian concepts in the film analysis. Firstly, I will look at the similarities between the virtual, as defined by Deleuze, and the spiritual realm, arguing that the films in this chapter present the spiritual realm as part of reality. Furthermore, this chapter will also draw on the Deleuzian concepts of the rhizome and ‘becoming’ in the section dedicated to the relationship between kinship identities and spirituality/religious identities. In the final part of this chapter, referring to the link between gender identities and spirituality/religious identities, Deleuze’s notion of multiplicity will also be applied. Before I delve into the film analysis, however, there is some terminology which I use in this chapter that necessitates clarification.

The significance of spiritual belief is evident from the considerable number of films coming out of the region that represent spirituality: Sarraounia (1986), Cri du Coeur (1994), Buud Yam (1997), La Genèse (1999), Sia Le Rêve du Python (2001), to name a few.
4.1 Defining religion, spirituality and the supernatural in the context of Francophone West Africa

Firstly, I wish to define some of the terms in this chapter that have a broad meaning and can therefore lead to some confusion. This includes the words religion/religious, spirituality/spiritual, supernatural/natural and real/unreal. I am aware that these definitions are not by any means fixed and that there are ongoing academic discussions in the fields of theology and philosophy of religion (Harrison 2006; Mudimbe and Kilonzo in Bongmba 2012; Ammerman 2013), which aim to address how changing social contexts affect the definitions of these words. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will work with definitions that are currently widely recognized and I will examine how these terms can then be used in the context of the films I will be analysing.

Religion is an overarching theme in this chapter. In a very broad sense, the Oxford English dictionary defines it as a belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship. (OED online 2017)

However, as anthropologist Rosalind Shaw remarks, definitions like these are skewed towards characterizing the dominant religions in the West (1990: 340). It is often assumed that in Francophone West African cinemas, religion is represented by one of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity). There is an expectation that religion must by definition be an organized belief. Yet the general definition of the word offered by the OED and cited above does not mention such requirements. This misunderstanding can then lead to gaps in the analysis of the representation of religion in Francophone West African cinemas, as lesser known beliefs are not thought to warrant the label of religion. Furthermore, as my discussion will demonstrate, Abrahamic religions have been adapted and encoded with indigenous beliefs in West Africa, in a process known as syncretism. In light of this, representations of religious identity in Francophone West African cinemas cannot be simply viewed as expressions of a single religious affiliation (Muslim,
Christian etc.); religious identity as represented in Francophone West African cinemas involves a complex negotiation between ethnicity, kinship and religion. In order to address the issue of religion in context in this chapter, I will therefore use the term as defined above, with the added criterion that such belief can stem from one’s ethnic history and/or adoption of widely held beliefs. Acknowledging this criterion will allow for a more nuanced analysis of representations of religious identity that takes into account the intersectional nature of identity representation.

Following this understanding of religion, we can define spirituality as a crucial aspect of religion, one that expresses the ‘attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests’ (OED online 2017). In Francophone West African cinemas, regard for the spiritual world appears to be of great narrative importance, since spirits are believed to affect the material world of the characters. In that sense, spirituality is portrayed as more than an attachment to immaterial elements of existence; it is expressed as a channelling of spirits into the material world. This understanding of spirituality is very similar to the above definition, yet it rejects the implied opposition between what is seen as spiritual and what is material. Instead, this understanding of spirituality offers a multidimensional vision of existence where the spiritual and the material are conjoined and one cannot be fully comprehended without the other.

In order to better understand the intangible side of religion and spirituality, it is necessary to define what this chapter identifies as manifestations of the supernatural. According the OED’s definition, the supernatural belongs to ‘a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings; attributed to or thought to reveal some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature’ (OED Online 2017). Theologian Kabiro wa Gatumu is critical of such definitions of the supernatural found in English dictionaries (‘beyond the laws of nature’, ‘beyond observable universe’) because, according to Gatumu, these definitions do not comply with what he calls an ‘African’ worldview. He contends that the ‘African worldview and religion (...) do not dichotomise the natural and supernatural as these perspectives work together’ (2008: 4) and he adds that ‘every
natural phenomenon could be interpreted within a supernatural framework’ (2008: 5). In other words, according to Gatumu’s approach, the supernatural is understood as forming a part of the natural world, and in some cultures can be perceived as offering explanation for all kinds of natural phenomena, from an exceptionally good harvest to the overflowing of rivers. This understanding of the term fits well with representations of the supernatural in Francophone West African cinemas: the link between the natural phenomena and the spiritual causation is undeniable in a number of films (Guimba, Faro, La Reine des Eaux; Ndeysaan; Mossane). Therefore, in this chapter, I am going to define the supernatural as a manifestation of the spiritual in the physical world that is seen as having an immediate impact on the lives of the characters in the films.

Curiously, all of the above terms stand somewhat in opposition to the word ‘real’, conventionally defined as ‘designating whatever is regarded as having an existence in fact and not merely in appearance, thought, or language’, in other words ‘actually existing physically as a thing, substantial’ (OED Online 2017). The understanding of the word ‘real’ in this chapter is bound with that of Deleuze, who would certainly oppose the connection made above between real and physical. According to Deleuze, what is described above is called the actual, that which is present in material form and ‘resemble[s] the corresponding empirical fields’ (Deleuze 1990: 102). Nevertheless, the things that do not possess physical form, such as memory and spirit and, in Deleuzian terms the virtual, are still real: ‘if virtual is opposed to actual, it is not opposed to real, far from it’ (Deleuze 1989: 41). Deleuze’s use of the word real is far more suitable to the analysis of the representations of religion in Francophone West African cinemas than the more conventional definition. This is due to the possibility that a relativist approach to the analysis of religion on screen warrants a more insightful avenue of research and one that gives equal value to non-Western, non-secular perceptions of existence.

92 Gatumu is not alone in claiming a shared view of the coexistence of the natural and the supernatural in Africa. Mazama writes about how ‘in the African context’, people feel ‘integrated into a universe that is much larger than any of them and yet is centered around them’ (2002: 220), while Chimaraaoke O. Izugbara mentions the ‘omnipresent and long-standing’ belief in supernatural forces permeating natural phenomena on the continent (2011: 534).
This approach necessitates the interpretation of the term real as that which occurs within one’s existence regardless of the presence or absence of its physical form. This discussion will develop further later in the chapter.

Although the above definitions suggest that religion and spirituality have separate meanings, the two terms have become somewhat conflated in their application to West Africa. For instance, Geoffrey Parrinder and John S. Mbiti refer to ‘West African religion’ (1975) and ‘African religion’ (1991) respectively, but seem to be drawing on spirituality and other aspects of West African cultures (proverbs, music, dance, etc.) in their understanding of ‘African religion’. Anthropologist Dominique Zahan distinguishes ‘African spirituality’ as ‘the very soul of African religion’ as well as ‘the feeling man has in realizing himself (...) (about) his humanity’ (1979: 1). Zahan expresses what Parrinder and Mbiti only imply, that religion does not have to be understood as a doctrine of separation of the human and the divine. Instead, she identifies the strong bond between religion and spirituality in Africa and claims that Africans

merge themselves to a certain extent with the world, the universe, and God so as to see in religion, rather, a series of concerns for the harmony and placement of man within the whole formed by the visible and invisible world. (1979: 2)

Zahan illustrates that the word religion, as it is commonly understood in the West, creates some confusion when applied in the African context. She, along with Parrinder and Mbiti, proceed to use the word religion in their work because their focus is mostly on the organizational and ritual elements of African spiritual practice. In this chapter, however, I am going to use the word spirituality for what they describe, since I use the term religion to refer to Abrahamic religions, specifically Islam.

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93 This merging of divine and human has been described by African philosophers as ‘the principle of the unity of being’ (Mazama 2002: 219). It is a belief that an ‘energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all that is (...) ensures the fundamental unity of all that exists’ (Mazama 2002: 219).

94 The anthropologist and philosopher Robin Horton condemns this one-dimensional understanding of religion among social anthropologists for the continuing failure ‘to understand traditional religious thought’ in Africa (1993: 197).
Additionally, Zahan, Parrinder and Mbiti address this religion as ‘African’, which appears insensitive to the ethnic as well as religious diversity of the continent, but Zahan and Parrinder display awareness of this problem and how it can be resolved. According to Zahan, ethnic diversity affects the ritual expression of ‘African’ spirituality and not necessarily its key ideas, which she believes are shared across the continent (1979: 2). She ascribes the difference in the expression of these key ideas to the difference in landscapes inhabited by those affiliated with ‘African’ spirituality. Thus, the specific ethnic identities are reflected in the day-to-day practice of ‘African’ spirituality, while the central ideas about the human spirit are shared across ethnic groups and continue to have influence in Islamized parts of West Africa. Additionally, Parrinder shows that ‘African religion’ is far from immune to the influences of Abrahamic religions that dominate some of the regions in Africa. He does so by locating the inspiration for some deities in ‘African’ spirituality in Islamic and Christian ideas of God residing in the sky (1975: 23-27). However, Mbiti makes the most important point about diversity and ‘African’ spirituality, which is that

no individual member of the society concerned can stand apart and reject the whole of his people’s religion. To do so would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people. (1991: 15)

Mbiti asserts that regardless of conversions to other religions, the majority of Africans will not reject the beliefs their communities are built and function on, since these beliefs enlace their cultures and everyday lives. In particular, ethnic cultures and societies in West Africa are strongly influenced by the belief in spiritual presence.

The representation, or lack thereof, of spiritual presence on screen is an important element of the representation of spirituality. As Sora Wade claims in the above statement, the supernatural, or spiritual, occurs in the everyday lives of the characters in his film. Yet, very little attention is actually drawn to the physical

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95 Islam is the dominant religion in the north (including Mali and Senegal), while 62.7% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population is Christian (Pew Research Center 2014).
manifestations of supernatural elements in this chapter’s films, despite their significance within the films’ stories. These supernatural occurrences take the form of circles on a water surface or a thick fog, for instance, and are usually perceived by the characters as a feeling rather than being visually represented on screen. On the one hand, this absence of visual evidence of the supernatural is likely due to the lack of funding which plagues most West African film productions; the technical budget for any computer-generated imagery (CGI) use in these films is virtually non-existent. On the other hand, however, the filmmakers’ reluctance to represent the supernatural elements on screen could also point to a resistance to a Western style of screen representation of the spiritual and supernatural, whereby visual evidence of the supernatural is often crucial for both the audience’s understanding and for the film’s box office success. By refusing to use CGI to represent spiritual influences, West African filmmakers develop a cinematic language that expresses spirituality while making sure its representation is completely rooted within its ethnic and religious context.

This cinematic language reluctant to represent the spiritual and the supernatural through the use of CGI can be seen as an interpretation of the notion of visibility in ‘African’ spirituality. When describing the lack of a concrete dichotomy between reality and the supernatural in African spirituality, Africanist Mambo Ama Mazama admits that ‘the main difference between the world of the spirits and the world of the living is essentially one of degree of visibility’ (2002: 221). Like Zahan, Mazama confirms that the division between the spiritual realm and what humans see as reality is purely a matter of perception. In other words, there is no question whether the spiritual realm exists in ‘African’ spirituality; it does exist but it cannot be perceived on the same level as reality. This idea in Africa of the invisible spiritual realm ‘well advanced beyond the first dawn of the religious sense’ (Parrinder 1975: 12) has been later theorized by Deleuze, although without his direct reference to it or possibly even an awareness of its existence. Ronald Bogue, author of several volumes on Deleuze, outlines Deleuze’s version of the spiritual realm, which he calls
the virtual, which is the transcendental condition of possibility of all empirical, individual entities. The virtual, this transcendental field, and the actual, the world of commonsense entities, are both real, and the virtual is immanent within the actual, but the two exist in different ways and have qualitatively different characteristics. (2010: 21-22)

In other words, the transcendental, or the spiritual, exists within the real but it cannot be perceived as actual (i.e. through human sensory systems). It can merely be sensed or felt as an affect. Therefore, it is possible that many West African filmmakers are true to this aspect of ‘African’ spirituality and choose to avoid using CGI to depict the spiritual realm in their films.

The two films I have chosen to analyse in this chapter each focus more predominantly on either spirituality or religious identity but they both acknowledge the very close connection between spirituality and religion. *Timbuktu* takes place during the Islamist invasion of northern Mali, offering a collection of scenes of minor characters defiant in the face of Islamist oppression as a background to the story of Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed dit Pino), his wife Satima (Toulou Kiki) and daughter Toya (Layla Walet Mohamed). The film shows the fate of the Tuareg herding family who, following a conflict with a Mande fisherman, finds itself torn apart by the Islamist fighters who have taken the law into their own hands. Like *Timbuktu*, *Ndeysaan: Le Prix du Pardon* also revolves around a conflict, in this case between two kinship lineages whose youngest descendants Mbanik (Gora Seck) and Yatma (Hubert Koundé) both wish to marry Maxoye (Rokhaya Niang). The two male protagonists are destined to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, eventually leaving Maxoye to bear both of their children and thus uniting the lineages forever. The story is narrated by a *griot* and deeply rooted in the ethnic culture of the Lebou people in western Senegal.

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96 Not all West African filmmakers avoid CGI (Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* being a prime example of a limited use of CGI) and CGI use has certainly increased with the advent and rise of popular Nigerian cinema. However, there are still some scholars who recommend that special effects representing spiritual themes be applied by a creative team ‘capable of developing the themes into a good treatment without destroying the Africanness or originality of such stories’ (Ukadike 1994: 156).
4.2 Spirituality/religious identity and ethnic identity: The past is just under the surface

This part of the chapter will explore the connection between ethnic identities and spirituality/religious identities represented in Ndeysaan and Timbuktu. Unlike in the previous chapters, this chapter will present the two films in dialogue, in order to identify intersections of specific identities in both films. First, the analysis will focus on how Ndeysaan conveys this connection through linking the sea with Lebou ethnic identities and the spiritual realm, before moving on to look at the possible application of the Deleuzian concepts of fabulation and the virtual to Ndeysaan’s representations of spirituality. Next, I will examine how in Timbuktu resistance to the Islamist invasion of the town in the film relies on the creative relationship between ethnic identities and spirituality.

Spirituality, partially due to its close interlinking with ethnic identity, risks being overlooked by scholars due to the tendency for interpreting texts from the African continent as national metaphors. This is particularly evident in Alice Burgin’s analysis of Ndeysaan as an articulation of négritude philosophy, which is a part of the Contesting Historical Divides in Francophone Africa (Griffiths 2013) volume. In her chapter, Burgin draws on Diawara’s labelling of Ndeysaan as ‘the Senegalese film most grounded in the philosophy of négritude’ (2013: 205) and proceeds to read the representations of spirituality in the film as ‘a spiritual sub-reality (surréalité) that exists beyond the surface level of the everyday, creating in the film a duality within the Lébou universe’ (2013: 208). Burgin uses the article to dismantle Diawara’s suggestion that Ndeysaan sets up a national cinematic language of Senegal but she does not engage with Diawara’s problematic association of the film with négritude philosophy. This association not only undermines the representations of ethnic identity in the film, it also misinterprets the spirituality of the film’s characters.

Both the film and the book it is based on are steeped in the culture of the Lebou ethnic group, so any connections made between it and the négritude movement
must be very carefully negotiated. Négritude, as imagined by Senghor and Aimé Césaire, is a response to the preceding French colonial ideology; it ‘glorifies the African past by romanticising the primitive society and the traditions of black cultures’ (Burgin 2013: 206). The movement has an undeniable place in the cultural production of post-independence Senegal as well as within the civil rights movement in America, but it loses some relevance when applied to the films of late 20th and early 21st century. This is due to the fact that négritude focuses on reclaiming ‘blackness’ from the colonial heritage, which, while a necessary goal, has been surpassed by the urgency of representing specific ethnic identities within ‘blackness’97 and de-essentialising it. Besides, the Lebou form a very small proportion of Senegal’s population yet they have preserved a strong ethnic identity (Shoup 2011: 163-164). Therefore, by implying that Ndeysaan is a representation of ‘blackness’ or Senegalese-ness more than it is a representation of Lébou ethnic identity, Burgin denies the diversity of ‘black’ identities figured on screen.

While spirituality may be an important aspect of other ‘black’ identities, Ndeysaan represents spirituality that anchors itself in Lebou ethnic identities. Mbiti suggests that there is an inherent tie between spirituality in Africa, or as he calls it the ‘African religion’, and ethnic identity (1991: 14). This is particularly evident in the connection the film draws between the main protagonists’ lives and the sea/water. For the Lebou people, water and the sea have a significant place in their spiritual beliefs and practices due to the sea traditionally being their main source of food and income (Shoup 2011: 163). In the film, when the sea becomes possessed by an evil spirit that manifests as both a fog and an absence of fish, the people in the village become anxious and seek help from their marabout as well as a fetish man. It is made clear that without the sea being accessible to the fishermen, the whole village suffers both materially but also emotionally. There are multiple long shots of the seacoast shrouded in fog and the fishermen sitting on the beach and staring into the distance. Their faces are emotionless, transfixed by the fog and the sea, indifferent to the strong wind that blows sand around them and creates an

97 bell hooks talks about ‘multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible’ (1990).
eerie acoustic atmosphere of the scene. The understated performance of these characters in the face of the harsh wind illustrates their emotional bond with the sea; they insist on staying near the sea and observing it until they can figure out what ails it, suggesting strength of a bond similar to the one between close friends or partners. In the eyes of these fishermen, the sea has a spirit or spirits of its own and must therefore be treated with the same respect as a fellow member of their ethnic group. The same men correspondingly gather in Baaye Sogi’s compound when it becomes obvious that he is about to draw his last breath, and they hold a vigil to pay their respects. Evidently, the film aims to capture not only the strong Lebou identity of these characters but also the underlying spiritual connection between themselves and the sea that sustains them.

The tie between ethnic identity and spiritual identity is also evident in the significance of the role that storytelling plays in the film. Storytelling, as I have established in the first chapter, is a crucial part of most West African ethnic cultures and ‘among the Lebou, orality (…) is a fundamental factor in all types of communication’ (Ndione 1993: 89). Apart from the fact that the film is narrated by a griot, storytelling itself features in the story when Maxoye, Mbanik, Yatma and their friends spend an evening sitting in a circle, eating and discussing the village’s predicament. The conversation is directed towards Mbanik and Yatma, and the heroic feats their ancestors are known for, prompting both men to entertain their friends with these stories. Both men announce their names, the names of their fathers and the names of their ancestors, and conclude their stories by stating the titles they carry (King of the Savannah, Lord of the Seas) as a result of their ancestors’ feats. This act of linking their names with their ancestors’ in their stories allows Mbanick and Yatma to verbalize their understanding of their place in the world, the search for which Zahan sees as the key function of spirituality. The fact that the men choose to express their place in the world through Lebou orality marks the significance that storytelling holds in demonstrations of spirituality.

Furthermore, the way the stories of the two men are actually depicted on screen reveals how these ancestor stories have a life of their own, their existence in the
spiritual realm impacting the narrative of the story in the present. When each man is telling his story, the film cuts from a close-up of his face to a silhouette animation of his story. This is created by placing a cardboard cut-out in front of a backlit background and moving it with attached wires. Through the use of different types of image, i.e. live action and animation, the film separates the reality of the protagonists from the temporal dimension in which the ancestors reside. Most importantly, however, the animation sequence stands out so much that it brings to mind Deleuze’s explanation of fabulation\(^98\) as an ‘image (…) so intense that it has a life of its own’ (Deleuze 1998: 118). The contrasting format of the ancestor stories indeed fits this description of fabulation, in which representations of spirits and gods are brought forth (Bogue 2010: 15) in order to ‘invent a people’ (Deleuze 1998: 4). Yet, Deleuze’s version of fabulation sounds like it requires a communal participation in a spiritual awakening, whereas what Yatma and Mbanick are doing is a more personal form of fabulation to support their own causes (winning Maxoye’s heart). Their respective fabulations seem to impact their own lives, with Yatma later pouncing on Mbanick like the lion in his story does, and Mbanick’s spirit settling in the shark from his ancestor’s story. Both of the men’s fabulations thus continuously influence their behaviour, giving them a sense of their ancestors being on their side, but also root them more firmly in the Lebou storytelling universe because the men identify themselves with Lebou mythical past.

The idea that spirits, ancestral or otherwise, continue to have impact on the present reality has long been a part of the spirituality in West Africa, before it was theorized in more secular words by Deleuze. Mbiti shows the reason for it being so is a deeply held belief that human life does not end with death, it merely loses its physical form and continues to exist within the spiritual realm (1991: 75). Since

\(^98\) Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson’s concept of fabulation, which is essentially a function of the imagination, ‘a machine for manufacturing giants’ (Deleuze 1998: 118). Deleuze, however, translates Bergson’s concept into art and literature and attempts to ‘give it a political meaning’ (Smith in Deleuze 1998: xlv) by making fabulation into a tool of those who found themselves to be a minority within a larger context. Fabulation can then be used as a political act which, by creating a people to come, ‘attains these visions, it raises itself to these becomings and powers’ (Deleuze 1998: 3). In other words, fabulation offers those in a minority the chance to have a quantitative leverage to argue their cause.
these spirits are still human, they can think, speak, and use their powers (Mbiti 1991: 70) and therefore permeate from the spiritual realm to affect reality. Similarly, Deleuze conceptualised this notion as a flow between the virtual and the actual. Bogue summarizes Deleuze’s theory that

the real is constituted by a constant passage of the virtual into the actual, but the relationship between the two is not that of cause and effect, or of idea to embodiment (...). Rather, the virtual is like a vector map of zones of ongoing constructive, generative activity, each zone serving at most as a pilot in an open-ended movement beyond any pre-constructed map. (2010: 24-25)⁹⁹

The difference between Deleuze’s conception of the relationship between the virtual and the actual, and the West African belief in the spiritual realm affecting reality appears to be one of specificity. While Deleuze is characteristically ambiguous in his description, the West African spiritual beliefs concentrate on the specific spirits, both human and nature spirits,¹⁰⁰ and what their intentions are in the physical world. This particularity can be attributed to the fact that these beliefs are a part of everyday life and the spiritual manifestations in the physical world are directed at individuals/groups with explicit issues (Gatumu 2008: 7). Often, as in Ndeysaan, the people experiencing a contact with the spiritual realm know the names of those human spirits affecting their reality. Apart from this specificity, however, the two conceptualisations of the spiritual/virtual are very similar.

In addition to hinting at the spiritual presence in reality, Ndeysaan also shows the lack of accountability that arises when natural phenomena are attributed to spirits. When explaining the mood in the village to his dying father, Mbanick says the villagers ‘think the spirits are tormenting us’ with the long-lasting thick fog. Yatma also believes that the fog is not ‘natural’ and that Mbanick as the son of the village’s

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⁹⁹ Deleuze himself describes this situation in more opaque terms: ‘the actual and the virtual... The essential point, in any event, is that the two related terms differ in nature, and yet ‘run after each other’, refer to each other, reflect each other, without it being possible to say which is first, and tend ultimately to become confused by slipping into the same point of indiscernibility’ (Deleuze 1989: 46).

¹⁰⁰ Mbiti points out that spirits are associated with humans as well as natural objects and forces (1991: 70-71).
marabout should lead the village in its spiritual cleansing. What Mabnick’s and Yatmas’ dialogues aim to verbalize is

the pervasive religious imagination in Senegal (that) sees spiritual forces operative everywhere and understands causality primarily in spiritual terms and worldly events as determined primarily in the spiritual realm (the realm of the mystique). (Gifford 2016: 256)

Although scholar of religion Paul Gifford writes about Senegal in general, only briefly considering ethnic differences, he distinctly identifies the substantial role spirituality plays in everyday interpretation of events seemingly beyond human control. Gifford also argues that this way of thinking decreases the chances of humans taking responsibility for their own actions (2016: 264), thus impacting negatively on the socio-economic development of the country. A very similar argument is voiced by Mbanick defending his absence at a sacrificial ritual performed by a witch doctor that the elders of the village have hired. Mbanick opines that ‘If you want the ancestors to help you, help yourself first’, though he does not offer any suggestions on what ‘helping yourself first’ would entail. It is interesting that through his later actions, Mbanick reveals himself to also believe in ill-willing spirits that he as a son of the village’s deceased marabout must confront to get rid of the fog. It is possible that his initial anger was simply about the fact that the village elders have hired someone outside the village, whose claim to spiritual powers cannot be fully verified (Mbanick calls the witch doctor ‘a charlatan’), instead of asking his dying father for advice. This would then mean that Mbanick is more critical of the people who use spiritual beliefs to enrich themselves than he is of the belief in spiritual causation itself. Through Mbanick, the film shows awareness of the fact that spirituality is often taken advantage of, and it points to the need to act on one’s spirituality in reality. The connection between the spiritual and the real is therefore a matter of balance, conveyed in Ndeysaan by the juxtaposition of images of the characters and the sea.
The repetitive sea imagery draws attention to the sea’s significance in the connection between the spiritual realm and reality. It seems that this metaphysical connection between the two aspects of what Deleuze calls real is reliant, if not completely dependent, on ‘a zone of recollections, dreams, or thoughts’ (Deleuze 1989: 46). This is because the spiritual realm, or the virtual, is occupied by human spirits of those who died either recently or a long time ago and in order to identify them and possibly decode their intentions, people have to remember them. Mbiti admits that memory plays a crucial role in spirit belief in Africa and even though it is impossible to remember all of the ancestors, some of them may be recollected through myths and legends as tribal, national or clan founders, and in reciting or recounting one’s genealogies (...) [while] people who died recently are remembered by their families, relatives and friends for up to four or five generations. (1991: 75-77)

In Ndeysaan, memory is shown to be the means of connection between the spirits inhabiting the sea and the reality on shore. The film is punctuated with long shots of the sea in those moments when it is suggested that the spirits are observing what is happening on land (people discussing the cause of the thick fog, Mbanick’s son being born after Mbanick’s death) but there are also some shots of the sea as characters look at it while remembering Mbanick (young Amul [Alioune Ndiaye] looking at the sea and Mbanick’s wrecked canoe on the shore, Maxoye looking at the sea as if to ask Mbanick for forgiveness before allowing Yatma to finally be intimate with her). In these scenes, the sea acts as a trigger of memory, allowing Mbanick’s spirit to affect the actions of the characters on shore. In the final scene, the griot (grown-up Amul) narrating the story in the film likens the sea to memory, as he concludes that ‘since then, the waves have swept away their stories to far-off oceans. And the sea itself learnt to forgive’. For the old Amul, the sea bears witness to the stories of the Lebou village and it will be associated with these stories as long as there is someone who has an emotional connection to them (such as himself).
Memory can also be seen as the most specific link between the representations of spirituality and ethnic identities in Ndeysaan as well as in the films in the previous chapters. Not only is memory a significant factor in the belief in spirits, it also facilitates the collectivity of ethnic identities through physical objects and landscapes. French historian Pierre Nora described these landscapes as sites of memory, lieux de mémoire, where ‘memory crystallizes and secretes itself’ (1989: 7) and forms a part of cultural memory of a community. In my first chapter, I have discussed how the mosque and the mountainous landscape in Keïta, the Heritage of the Griot allow the past to infiltrate the present due to the significance they hold for the Mande ethnic group. In Ndeysaan, the sea can be interpreted through the same point of view, because it is so inseparable from the historical economy of the Lebou people (Chauveau 1986: 197) and so the imagery of the sea signifies a way of life for the Lebou.\footnote{There is a point to be made here about reclaiming the imagery of the Atlantic coast from the negative connotations of Senegal’s colonial history. At no point does the film lend itself to be read with regards to the heritage of slavery on the Atlantic coast. Instead it is entirely focused on the heritage of the Lebou people who have inhabited the coast since the 15th century (Chauveau 1986). The film’s lack of reference to slave trade renders the imagery of the sea with a specific ethnic significance, rather than limiting the interpretations of sea imagery to French colonial history in Senegal. The lieux de mémoire is re-interpreted in the film, an act that Zeynep Çelik described, in relation to the appropriation of public space in Algiers, as a ‘gesture (which) reversed at the same time the “dominant” and the “dominated” lieux de mémoire’ (2002: 150).} For the griot telling the story in the film, a more personal memory of growing up in the village is triggered, as the sound of waves crashing onto the shore accompanies the title sequence at the beginning of the film followed by an extreme close up of his eyes and then a long shot of the seashore. Similarly, shots of the Lebou fishermen tending to their canoes and mending fishing nets can be considered as signifiers of Lebou cultural memory because these images are invested with both personal and collective emotion. Thus, the bond between landscape and ethnic identity can be seen through the prism of memory, which, in turn, facilitates the connection with Lebou ancestral spirits that are believed to reside in the landscape as well.

Although Ndeysaan mostly foregrounds the link between spirituality and Lebou ethnic identities, a closer look at the mise-en-scène reveals that Islam also has spiritual influence on the characters. When it becomes clear to Yatma that he is...
targeted by the shark off the coast of the village, he journeys to a distant marabout to get advice on how to proceed. The film introduces the marabout in a long shot that takes in the width of his tent, with the marabout, dressed in all white, sitting on the floor in the centre of the shot, illuminated from the side by candlelight. The marabout is writing on a tablet, facing away from Yatma as well as the screen but nevertheless he knows who came to visit him and why. The setup of this shot portrays the marabout as a man of higher consciousness towards whose ‘illuminated’ persona the viewer’s eyes naturally gravitate, yet he maintains an air of mystery as he does not readily turn his face towards Yatma and the screen. The moment represents a rather mystical version of Islam, one that has been incorporated into the spirituality of the protagonists but does not compete with prior beliefs. This compatibility of Islam with Lebou beliefs is then confirmed as the marabout explains to Yatma that he has offended the spirits in the sea with his crime and that he should heed this advice and not enter the sea for another year. Until this shot, there could have been some doubt whether the marabout can be that strongly associated with Islam but as the two characters turn away from each other, it is apparent that they are both reading from the Qur’an and the marabout owns a particularly large and ornamental copy. This subtle inclusion of the symbols of Islam in the mise-en-scène presents Islam in the film’s Lebou community as an underlying influence that has to follow the logic of Lebou spirituality in order to be effective.

In *Timbuktu*, the link between ethnic identities and Islam appears as well, but here the film highlights the effect of ethnic identities on the characters’ relationship with their religion, in this case Islam. The film takes a slightly meandering form, where the narrative involving the main protagonists is interspersed with anecdotal scenes with minor characters, but all the characters in the film are united by their strong ethnic identification. These characters see themselves first and foremost as members of their ethnic group and they use their ethnic identities to define their religious belief accordingly. In one of the scenes that interrupt the course of the film’s main narrative thread, a Bambara woman and her daughter are visited by a
foreigner who, with the use of two translators, is asking for the daughter’s hand in marriage. The mother rejects the offer, stating that she does not know the suitor and it is not in her tradition to give away her daughter when the father is not present. When threatened with violence by the suitor, the mother exclaims that she only fears God. Both mother and daughter are adamant about following their traditions, including getting to know the suitor first, rather than simply accepting his request based on his appearance as a good Muslim. Unlike the men in this scene, the women and their religion are strongly shaped by their ethnic identity, so even though all the characters are Muslim, the women place equal importance on their statuses as Bambara women and Muslim women. The mother believes that her God will understand her priorities as a mother and a Bambara woman, and she therefore feels confident to refuse the man who disrespects these traditions and her faith.

The scene not only demonstrates the links between ethnic and religious identities in the film, it allows an insight into the female characters’ understanding of their faith as an extension of their ethnic identity.

The women’s relationship to their ethnic identity and Islam is also made apparent by their dress: both mother and daughter wear colourful wrappers (long dresses, typical Bambara fashion) and a headdress close to their skin, with a solid colour veil around the mother’s head while the daughter wears a chador (a long piece of black fabric placed around one’s head and upper body). The daughter dressed in a chador particularly draws attention to how misplaced the Islamists rules for women are in this setting, as the garment is not usually worn by Bambara women or women of any other ethnicity in West Africa. Additionally, both of these types of veiling stand out against the colour and pattern of the dresses underneath, providing a visual comment on how the invading Islamist men have imposed a certain rigid version of Islam on these women, who choose to celebrate their religion through means that are more in tune with their ethnic identities. The framing of this scene highlights how limiting this version of Islam is on the women:

102 Anthropologist Adeline Masquelier interprets the chador as a symbol of attempted Islamisation, and gives examples of women coerced into wearing this type of veiling in Iran and Sudan (2009: 104).
they are sitting in the lower-right background while the men’s figures surround them on both sides and also dominate them vertically. The mother is outnumbered, nevertheless she stands her ground and looks the suitor straight in the eye as her words are translated through two men; she does not appear to be afraid of the invaders. She seems to have confidence in the fact that her decision is consistent with both her faith and Bambara social norms.

Since all of the characters in *Timbuktu*, including the invaders, share a religion (Islam), the film uses language to differentiate the character’s ethnic identities and their approaches to religion. However, when it comes to communication between the invaders and the inhabitants of the town, the disconnection between the various groups of people becomes blatantly obvious. One of these scenes of translation occurs between Kidane, the leader of the Jihadists and his translator. Kidane speaks in Tamasheq, the language of Tuareg peoples residing around the Timbuktu region, while the Jihadist chief only speaks Arabic. Kidane is aware that the chief does not want to pay him too much attention: their dialogue is shot in close-ups of Kidane’s face, followed by medium shots of the two jihadists occupying the same frame, emphasizing the disconnection between the two parties. So, Kidane tries to appeal to the chief’s emotions through the phrasing of his replies, making the chief aware that Kidane is a devout Muslim who cares about nothing more than his daughter Toya. On the other side of the conversation, the chief admits to the translator that he is deeply disturbed by having to make Kidane’s daughter an orphan but he tells the translator not to translate this sentiment to Kidane. Any emotional connection that Kidane may have achieved with the chief is thus obstructed by the language barrier as well as physically (the chief avoids Kidane’s stare by writing his statement into a book). Yet, the mise-en-scène of the scene marks the chief as being open to communication: there are four mobile phones and a radio transceiver on the table in front of him (see Figure 10). It appears as if the chief is only willing to communicate with those who are already a part of his network and presumably speak the same language as him. This means that even though he and Kidane are of the same religion, the language difference,
and therefore the ethnic difference between them indicates that the two men do not, in fact, share the same religious identity.

However, the above scene proceeds to show that even when the language barrier does not exist, as in the case of Kidane and the translator, the two men still do not share the same view of their religion. While the chief is writing down his statement, Kidane turns to speak to the translator and their dialogue is a shot/reverse shot construction without the two characters ever occupying the same frame, signalling their ongoing disconnection. In addition, the translator wears a turban with a veil around his face so that the absence of the language barrier is replaced by a physical barrier in the form of the translator’s costume. Despite only being able to see the man’s eyes, Kidane tells the translator he looks like someone Kidane knows and says the man’s name, name of his tribe and their location. In Kidane’s point of view, the translator speaks Tamasheq and therefore Kidane must be familiar with him because they must be members of the same ethnic group. Essentially, Kidane is trying to find out why this man, who seemingly shares his ethnic identity, does not help him get a more just punishment that would be more in line with their shared religion. Nevertheless, the translator claims to be from Libya and when asked what is his business with the Islamists, he replies that they go back a long way. This can be interpreted as the translator not sharing an ethnic identity with the Islamists but agreeing with what they do. Kidane is very clearly
sceptical of what this man says, and he uses his monologue to imply that even if they may not be of the same ethnicity, they are still Muslims and as such they both know that human life is considered sacred and can only be taken away by God. This exchange between the two characters illuminates the fact that, regardless of their (possibly) shared ethnic identity and religion, Kidane and the translator disagree about what their faith says about the value of a human life. In other words, the scene shows a political barrier between the characters, rather than an ethnic or a religious one.

Still, this political barrier is not independent from religious and ethnic identities, otherwise the Islamist conquest of the town would not run up against the kind of resistance it does in the film. Although the Islamists are using their religion as a raison d’être of their invasion, the film reveals that their true motivation is to gain political power and eradicate the ethnic aspects that permeate the religious practice in this town. The town inhabitants depicted in Timbuktu all appear to be Muslim but of varying ethnicities and the centre of the town is dominated by a Sudanese-style mosque attended by both Tuareg and Bambara men. When the Islamists walk into the mosque, the camera is set at a low angle as it tracks their movement towards the mosque’s centre: this situates the viewer in the same position as the

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103 ‘What’s written will come to pass. I’m at peace with death. We all are its children. We must protect our children [camera cuts to the translator, distressed by what he hears]. My daughter won’t be protected anymore. That’s what hurts my soul the most. Going down to the grave without knowing what will happen. Many close friends are already gone [camera cuts to the chief, writing]. But in all this, since there’s only one God, whom I worship, He’ll dispense justice.’ By saying they are all the children of death, Kidane hints at the fact that they are all human, regardless of ethnic and religious differences. But only God can dispense justice, as Kidane says, which means he believes that God and nobody else has the right to take human lives as punishment for their crimes. Kidane suggests that by executing him, the Islamists are not only committing a crime against his daughter but also offending God by taking lives on his behalf.

104 The style of the mosque symbolizes the historical amalgamation of Islam with the ethnic cultures of the town. Although the term ‘Sudanese architectural style’ has been applied to most structures in the savannah belt of West Africa, it lacks formal definition. Labelle Prussin deliberates about Sudanese architecture in her influential book Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa (1986), where she describes the mosques in Timbuktu as having elements unique to the West African architectural repertoire (1986: 150). She concludes that these mosques are ‘key monuments in the history of Islam in West Africa [and] at the same time a quintessential expression of an Islam now Africanized’ (1986: 154).

105 Tuareg men can be identified by their headdress, a tagelmust or cheich, a turban-like head covering with a veil across the face (Philippi 2010), while Bambara men either have their head uncovered or they wear a kufi, a small cap made out of colourful fabric (Philippi 2010).
seated praying men in the mosque and allows us to see both the ethnic diversity of these men (see footnote above) as well as the fact that the Islamists have not taken off their shoes, a breach of mosque decorum. When this affront is criticised by the imam, in a medium eye-level shot, the Islamists (also in a medium eye-level shot) claim they do not need to follow the protocol because they are doing jihad. The scene is constructed in a way that depicts both parties as equal (eye-level) in spite of the Islamists trying to claim some superiority by standing up while conversing with the imam who is sitting on the floor. It is clear that this intrusion into the mosque is a power play by the Islamists in an attempt to show the town inhabitants that the imam’s authority does not apply to them. And yet, the following low-angle long shot from behind the imam as he castigates the Islamists renders him dominant over the situation and the Islamists are visually squeezed between an open door and a wall, losing their claim to space. This scene captures the priority of gaining political power by the Islamists but also the interlocking of politics and religion. The imam’s political power comes from being the highest religious authority in town, and the Islamists are using the same tactics in their invasion of the town. These two aspects of control are certainly interrelated in Timbuktu.

The reason why the Islamists’ attempts to gain political power though control of religious practices stand out so much in Timbuktu is because here, religion has been adapted to fit the ethnic identities of the characters. Some elements of Islamic faith have been interpreted and some have been omitted entirely. Among those omitted elements is the strict prohibition by Islam of art that includes figural representation, especially that of human form. West Africans, however, have not ceased making and purchasing items of art that are figural representations and this fact is very violently opposed by radical Muslims. The beginning of Timbuktu features a scene with the Islamists using Bambara wooden sculptures of naked men and women and

106 ‘Here, in Timbuktu, he who dedicates himself to religion uses his head and not his weapons.’ The imam suggests that religion is primarily about one’s self-reflection rather than imposing one’s beliefs on others through terror. It is a direct comment on why the Islamists have been encountering opposition from the town inhabitants: they violate people’s subjective approach to religion and they use violence instead of persuasion. As soon as the people have realized that religion is a guise for gaining power, they rebel against the Islamists in minor but still significant ways.
ritual masks for their target practice. The scene combines medium shots of the statues to highlight the impact of the bullets on their bodies, followed by a long shot showing the statues lined up from left to right of the frame. As the smallest statue on the right of the frame falls over after being shot at, the similarity between this image and that of an execution by firing squad is undeniable. A close-up of a ceramic vase with a human face betrays computer-generated smoke coming out of its mouth: the image suggests that physical pain is felt by these objects and that, upon their destruction, they are being vacated by some spiritual form. It may be a comment by the filmmaker on the impact this radical branch of Islam has on the more acculturated Islam in the town. The Islamists’ emphasis on control and violence seems to be intentionally ridding the local version of Islam of its adaptation to Bambara spirituality. This spirituality is clearly alien to the Islamists, they see it as another influence of the ethnic cultures on Islam, therefore they target these sculptural symbols of ethnic influence on Islam. The camera then slowly pans over the wooden statues lying in the sand, as it would over a battlefield laden with corpses. In a way, a battle between religious identity and spirituality is taking place and it seems that in this scene, the Islamists are winning because they express their religious identity in physical (destruction) rather than spiritual (creation) gestures. The process of creation and creativity can therefore be seen as an expression of spirituality (Buckenham 2011: 56-58), and as such it is the ultimate act of resistance to the Islamists.

*Timbuktu* presents us with a character of a witch that embodies this spirituality found in creativity. Despite her numerous bold acts of resistance to the Islamists, they are either not interested in punishing her or seem to lack the confidence to do so. Zabou (Kettyl Noël)\(^\text{107}\) thrives on creation which is visibly reflected in the mise-

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\(^\text{107}\) Kettyl Noël is a dancer and a choreographer, who was born in Haiti and lives in Mali. She references these biographical details of her life in this scene before she throws a charm to one of the Islamists. In an interview with BBC Africa, Noël says that Sissako approached her for the role because he wanted to have some reference to Haiti in the story and because to him, what she does for a living epitomizes freedom (BBC Africa 2015). Noël does not say why Sissako insisted to have a connection to Haiti in the scene but based on the fact that Noël’s character is presented as a witch, it could be assumed that a reference is being made to the Vodou religion practiced mainly in Haiti. Vodou is a syncretic religion, which, as Anthony Stevens-Arroyo claims, is seen as subversive to the
en-scène when the Islamists visit her at her residence. On the shelves and on the bed are pieces of colourful fabric, which she arranges and re-arranges; round mirrors and frames are hung up on tree branches around the bed; shattered pieces of a mirror are laid out on the floor and re-arranged. Zabou knots a couple of fabric pieces together and throws the knot to one of the Islamists (Hichem Yacoubi), claiming this will bring him luck. When the film cuts back to this scene, the Islamist has shed his headdress, shoes and weapons and performs an impassioned dance accompanied by a non-diegetic soundtrack, while the witch lies on her bed observing the dancer with a smile. The film hints at the possibility that Zabou has put a spell on the Islamist through the lucky charm, allowing him to express something that cannot be described by words through dance. What this performance shows is some form of spiritual awakening or connection, whereby the Islamist offers a physical expression of something that he feels to be beyond the common-sense (the actual) but can nevertheless be given existence in reality. In other words, the spiritual/virtual seeps into the actual through artistic creation. This scene, as well as others that include the characters engaging in creative activities, is meant to epitomize the religious identity of the inhabitants of this town, regardless of their Bambara or Tuareg ethnicity. Across their ethnic identities, these characters share a similar approach to religion which is closely linked to creativity and therefore also to spirituality.

This approach, which reflects the ‘syncretist pattern’ Prussin 1986: 3) 108 of the historical spread of Islam in West Africa, is deeply grounded in direct engagement with religion. The need to engage directly with religion is, in turn, consistent with and motivated by ethnic spirituality, according to which the spiritual can be channelled through the material. The significance of creative engagement in channelling the spiritual also marks a very specific point of convergence between values of Establishment religions because it combines the values of Establishment religions with a local social order (2002: 37). Noël’s character could therefore not only be a comment on the power of Islam influenced by spirituality in Francophone West Africa, she could also be seen as an embodying a combination of religion and creativity.

108 Syncretism is understood here as the process of combining elements of an ethnic culture with religious practice.
the indigenous understanding of spirituality and the Deleuzian theory of becoming. As mentioned before, Bogue refers to the virtual (spiritual) as a zone of ‘ongoing constructive, generative activity’ (2010: 25). Bogue emphasizes construction, or generation, as a crucial activity in the virtual. It corresponds with the notion of ancestors and other spirits in the spiritual realm being active agents but nonetheless unable to pre-determine the outcome of their activity. The ultimate physical manifestation of such activities is provided by humans in reality, like in the above case of the dancing Islamist. The arts, Bogue comments, ‘are capable of engaging the virtual and giving it a new embodiment as a “monument” of sensation’ (2010: 25). In other words, the dancing Islamist is spiritually engaging with his religion, entering the virtual, in order to construct an expression of his religious experience in the actual. His transformation, though short-lived, exposes a religious identity struggling with a transgressing ethnic spirituality, in a battle for the freedom of self-expression.

Both *Ndeysaan* and *Timbuktu* exhibit a strong link between the characters’ ethnic identities and their spirituality, enabled by the significance of memory and place in the two concepts. In *Ndeysaan*, Lebou spirituality finds an expression through storytelling, an act of fabulation, which connects the protagonists with the spirits of their ancestors as well as with the mythical past of their ethnic group. The film then joins the past, the present and the future of the characters with the imagery of the sea, crucial to Lebou ethnic identities and spirituality, in order to further emphasize the interconnectedness of Lebou identities. In *Timbuktu*, on the other hand, the Islamists actively seek to detach ethnic spirituality from their religion and the town inhabitants’ lives. Yet, the film depicts these efforts as futile because spirituality gives rise to a creative self-expression, making the characters more comfortable in their identities. This renewed strength found in their ethnic and religious identities can, like in the case of Kidane, embolden the characters in resistance and sacrifice. However, the characters in both films also draw strength and motivation from the

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109 Deleuze writes that ‘there is in human existence another plane, obscure and formless, where consciousness has not entered, and which surrounds it like an unilluminated extension or menace, as the case may be. And which itself gives off adventurous sensations, perceptions’ (1987: 160).
depth of connection with the people around them, resulting in a network of more than just physical bonds.

4.3 Spirituality/religious identity and kinship identity: the holy bond of relation

In this section of the chapter, I will discuss how Timbuktu and Ndeysaan represent the relationship between kinship identities and spirituality/religious identities. Ndeysaan focuses on the transformative and ameliorating power spirituality can have on broken kinship identities of the village, the analysis of which will be built around the Deluzian concept of ‘becoming’. Another Deleuzian notion in this section will be the rhizome, and it will be used to theorise the kinship and other networks of religious connection in Timbuktu.

Religion in Timbuktu can also be interpreted as a shared set of values and rules that glues together the diverse community and the families in and around the town, creating a microcosm of interdependence. The film highlights the fact that, despite being of different ethnicities, the inhabitants of the town coexist in peace and gather for prayer in the same mosque regardless of their ethnic identities. In an article titled ‘What is Religion? An African Understanding’, Jaco Beyers mirrors Zahan’s previously mentioned comments and concludes that an African understanding of religion emphasizes ‘a holistic approach to understanding unity’ (2010: 8), an approach that is visibly demonstrated in Timbuktu. The strength of the town’s community appears to be greatly reliant on the values the characters share through their religion. However, in order to better understand the unifying function of religion in both Timbuktu and Ndeysaan, we must look at how religion and religious identities interact with and rely on hierarchies of power and kinship identities in these films. After all, kinship, as discussed in chapter two, often provides the only social and economical network for individuals living in West African countries with decentralized government. Yet, Timbuktu aims to show that kinship is not the only socio-economic network that the characters rely on; there is a web of connections between the town’s inhabitants that goes beyond blood ties.
These connections mimic the kinship system to some extent but they are facilitated by the spatial proximity as well as shared religious beliefs between the film’s characters.

The motorbike rider in *Timbuktu* is the most visible manifestation of this type of connection between the inhabitants of the town. He appears very fleetingly, most notably when he gives Satima a ride to Kidane’s execution at the end of the film, and so has no character development in the film. This lack of character development points to the fact that the motorbike rider is not intended to be seen as an individual character, inasmuch as he is a physical embodiment of a link between certain characters. His earliest appearance in the film is when he is tying up canisters with water at a desert well and in the next shot dropping off one of the canisters by the fisherman’s boat on the river. He mounts the motorbike and the camera follows him as he drives off towards the right side of the (long shot) frame, while the fisherman in the next (long) shot carries the yellow canister towards the right side of the frame. Already, the figure movement of the two characters and the yellow canister across the screen can be sketched out as a small web. In the next shot, the motorbike rider carries another yellow canister across the screen to the left where Satima picks it up and carries it further. The sequence concludes with the motorbike rider walking towards the right side of the screen and then left towards his motorbike. The movement of the motorbike rider across the screen has left behind a web of connections between places and individuals that are otherwise not linked. By moving across the frame in such manner, he has drawn attention to a certain network between people that would be imperceptible in any other way.

This network of connections which lacks a central pivoting point is comparable to what Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). According to the two authors, a rhizome ‘assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers’ (1988: 7), in other words a non-hierarchical web of connections that can at times concentrate in a cluster. The rhizome that is recreated by the motorbike rider in *Timbuktu* shows this non-hierarchical structure (his movement within the frame is either left or right, not
up and down) but it also implies the existence of clusters (the families of the fisherman and Kidane, respectively). Furthermore, the fact that this rhizome mimics the motorbike rider’s distribution of water emphasizes the vital importance of the existence of such a rhizome in the film. It shows that aside from kinship ties, the community in the film holds together due to other shared aspects of their lives, including religion, which, I will argue, can contribute to the characters’ kinship identity.

There are two conditions shared by an overwhelming majority of the characters in *Timbuktu* and these conditions determine the shape and, indeed, the existence of a web of kinship or a rhizome, in Deleuzian terms. These conditions include the spatial proximity of the characters (they all reside in or around the town) and their shared religion (the town inhabitants are all assumed to be Muslim but they believe in values different from the Islamists). Although these stipulations appear quite vague at first, as the film progresses it becomes more acutely visible that whatever happens to one member of the community in the film can affect a number of other characters in both direct and indirect ways. The film does this through a subtle use of narrative tools such as non-linear narrative, signifying objects, and selective use of musical score. The non-linearity of *Timbuktu*’s narrative means that several short stories are developing simultaneously with the main narrative line and the film cuts between these stories in different locations around town, joining them into the interlaced structure of a rhizome. The storylines are then connected by signifying objects, for example a football links the scenes revolving around the town’s youth, their coach and the Islamists’ ban on games, while the use the same musical motif in the non-diegetic score connects groups across the town who defy the Islamists’ ban on music. The rhizomatic structure that arises from these connections is thus clearly defined by the spatial boundaries of the town and the inhabitants’ shared rejection of religious fundamentalism.

Nevertheless, the rhizome outlined in *Timbuktu* differs slightly in its nature from Deleuze and Guattari’s original idea and it is rather more compatible with Édouard Glissant’s understanding of rhizome. Glissant, a Martinican philosopher, draws
heavily on the Deleuzian notion of rhizome but he disagrees with Deleuze and Guattari on the crucial point of rootedness. Glissant admits that ‘the notion of the rhizome maintains (...) the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root’ (2009: 11). Deleuze and Guattari also concede that ‘there exist tree or root structures in rhizomes’ (1988: 15) but they seem wary of continuing to include them in their discussion: ‘We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles’ (1988: 15). The issue of whether or not roots are included in a rhizomatic structure is significant for the application of this Deleuzian concept in the analysis of Francophone West African cinemas, and especially in *Timbuktu*. The rhizome in *Timbuktu* that I have described so far appears as a horizontal structure, with its individual branches activated by a shared religion and confined by the geographical area represented in the film. In this stage, the rhizome is a model of the original idea by Deleuze and Guattari. However, the film posits certain vertical structures in its narrative that disrupt the purely horizontal nature of the rhizome and introduce rootedness into the situation. The film plants plotlines that, in addition to being a part of the horizontal rhizome in the film’s narration, function on a vertical basis (rootedness). This is done by following the plotlines of families and family members, including Kidane and his family, the fisherman and his family, and others. As much as these plotlines provide some rootedness in the film’s rhizome, 

![Figure 11 Extreme long shot of Toya in the desert](image)

110 Roots in the form of family lineage are also a vital part of thinking about ethnicity and kinship in francophone West Africa (see chapter 2) and therefore they need to be included in any theoretical applications of the Deleuzian rhizome to the analysis of francophone West African cinemas.
the film’s non-linear narrative structure prevents them from forming the ‘totalitarian root’ Glissant speaks of.

*Timbuktu* shows that these non-totalitarian, short roots function in a fragile symbiosis with the rhizome to provide the characters in the film with a safety net of kinship. The roots, or family plotlines, do not disrupt the rhizome due to their limited length, since the plotlines tend to only follow two generations of a family. Nevertheless, the film indicates that these roots depend on the rhizome for their survival, and vice versa. Kidane and Satima with their daughter Toya lead one of the root plotlines in the film. In one of the scenes they share as a family, Kidane and Satima are having tea in their tent while watching over Toya. The pair discusses the fact that all of their neighbours have fled, leaving them the only members of their tribe still residing near the invaded town. The film then cuts to an extreme long shot of the desert with a single green tree in the middle of the frame and Toya standing by the tree (see Figure 11). The shot is a potent invitation to interpret the family’s current situation and their plotline as that of the tree, being a rooted structure seemingly isolated but still having some underground supply of nutrients (see water delivery above). Yet the family’s link to the town’s rhizome is a tentative one due to the fact that they spent most of their time together but secluded from others, thus reducing the strength of their link with other characters. Without extended kinship of their tribe the family is, like the tree, considerably exposed which means that Toya in particular will suffer if anything happens to her roots (her parents). Through the image of the isolated tree, the film thus foreshadows the fragility of the family but also the fragility of the symbiosis between the root and the rhizome, as the rootedness seems to weaken its connection with the rhizome.

In fact, the film seems to suggest that attempts to create a core of the rhizome, namely through the Islamists’ religious dictatorship, is what disrupts the rhizome and its symbiotic relationship with roots the most. David Fancy, a Deleuze scholar in

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111 ‘The neighbours are gone.’ ‘Everyone has fled.’ ‘There’s no one left. We’re the only ones.’
112 The image is used on *Timbuktu*’s promotional material and on the cover of the DVD in the UK. Therefore, it must have been seen by the filmmaker and the distribution team as carrying a message crucial to the film.
dramatic arts, emphasizes that a rhizome is a ‘decentred milieu, with no distinctive beginning, core or endpoint. Its lack of central organization is rivalled only by its ubiquity’ (2010: 98). This means that the symbiotic relationship between the rhizome and roots is indeed possible as long as it does not descend into a centralized root structure. In *Timbuktu*, the root/rhizome symbiosis is threatened by the centralizing tendency of religious dictatorship by the Islamist invaders. The Islamists usurp all the decision-making in the town and concentrate power along their line of command while the rest of their recruits are depicted as powerless, voiceless or dependent. When looking for a source of music at night, in a high-angle shot we see the recruits gather and receive orders from their leader: the high-angle shot shows the leader in the centre of the frame with his silent recruits dispersed around him, mimicking the centralizing drive of their religious intolerance. After the source of the music is found, the leader calls his superior who, along with two other superiors reading the Qur’an, is pictured in the middle of a long shot. The men’s bodies are framing a carpet full of mobile phones and radio transmitters: this is the centre of the Islamists’ ‘rhizome’ where the line of communication and connection ends. As a group, the Islamists exist in a fake ‘rhizome’, one that has become too much like a ‘root’, claiming the individual voices of the recruits in the name of radical Islam.

The Islamists’ overly rooted ‘rhizome’ is counterbalanced by the imam who respects the rhizomatic structures within the town and builds his approach to religion accordingly. On multiple occasions, the imam encounters the Islamists in his mosque and in every such scene he is not on his own. The imam is sitting with other believers, tutoring a child or consulting an upset woman, which suggests that he appreciates the rhizomatic structure of kinship in the town and uses it to develop the inhabitants’ religious practice. Furthermore, he is seated in all his scenes,

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113 It fits Deleuze’s philosophy of non-dichotomous, non-hierarchical systems.
114 The recruits are actually losing their voices. In the scene prior to the night search for music, one of the recruits, a young rapper from France, is being filmed for a recruitment video but he cannot repeat the speech he was given to learn. The camera keeps recording the boy’s silent face as another recruit orders him to look more enthused. The boy’s rhizomatic connection with other recruits has been broken and his voice has been sucked in by the root, up the line of command.
staying at eye-level with other characters indicating that although his profession gives him a position of authority, he refuses to use this authority to become the ‘totalitarian root’ in the town’s rhizome. The imam’s position as a part of the town’s kinship rhizome seems to inform his religious identity as well. Where the Islamists use their religion to dictate nonsensical rules in order to take power and individuality away from the town’s inhabitants, the imam uses his religion to open a debate and give voice to those who cannot defend themselves. Unlike the Islamists, the imam sees that if religion is to work in a rhizomatic community such as the one in Timbuktu, it must operate on the same rhizomatic principles: it must be conducive to connective rather than hierarchical thinking. In Glissant’s terms, the imam’s religious identity is a relation identity, since his idea of religion is one ‘where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps’ (2009: 144). In other words, relation identity arises from the ‘conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures’ (2009: 144) rather than from a singular point of origin from which the filiation of ideas is violently defended. What the imam in Timbuktu shows then is the fact that the Islamists’ religion, with its rigid power hierarchy that does not factor in the different (rhizomatic) kinship structures of some ethnic groups, is unlikely to affect the religious identity of the film’s characters. Religious identity is closely linked to kinship identity and the lack of understanding thereof is undermining the Islamists’ religious authority.

In Ndeysaan, Islam appears to be compatible with the village’s kinship rhizome but this compatibility is conditioned by the religion’s tolerance of Lebou spirituality. When the villagers feel the Lebou spirituality is ignored, the credibility of the village’s imam suffers and the kinship identities of the villagers deteriorate. The villagers grow suspicious about Mbanick’s death, Yatma’s marriage to Maxoye, and the shark’s attacks on fishermen and they seek answers from their leader, Peer Njay (Nar Sene). Peer, however, does not want to admit what really happened to Mbanick and the possibility of Mbanick’s spirit living on in the shark and so he and the imam alter the truth and deny the possibility of any related spiritual occurrences. Mbanick’s mother feels insulted by this and she condemns Peer and
the imam in front of everyone for being cowards that cannot face the spiritual aftermath of Mbanick’s death. This encounter reveals just how much Islam still relies on Lebou spirituality in order to function and be accepted by the villagers as a religion compatible with their kinship structures. The fact that the imam and Peer ignore the Lebou beliefs in spiritual possession means that they also disregard the general belief in vertical kinship, whereby one’s fate can be affected by the actions of one’s ancestor (see Mbanick and Yatma’s ancestor stories). Vertical kinship, or family lineage, is, as I have established in chapter two, not only a crucial factor in a character’s kinship identity; it is what connects families within an ethnic group by dictating how they engage with one another. In other words, vertical kinship can be seen as the connective tissue of a kinship rhizome. Any disruption to this tissue affects the rhizome of kinship and, consequently, the imam and Peer’s credibility as religious leaders.

Earlier in the film, this disruption to the kinship rhizome is made apparent by the fishermen, who remain symbolically defiant to Peer Njay’s plotting, with the use of the language of Lebou spiritual beliefs. There are two distinct scenes in which this happens, with either Peer Njay or his son Yatma sitting within hearing distance of the fishermen’s dialogue. In both instances, the group of fishermen are engaging each other in word plays and riddles while playing games or mending their fishing nets. At the beginning of these scenes, the camera focuses on the fishermen’s hands in close-up, moving sticks or shells in the sand or repairing their nets with a needle and a thread. These activities rely on creating or repairing rhizomatic structures (schematic patterns, nets), showing that the fishermen think there has been some disruption to the rhizomatic structure of kinship in their village. Furthermore, the language they use in their riddles is charged with spiritual significance and the men use it to opine about the recent events in the village:

When the lion roars, the doe trembles. When the shark’s dorsal fin slices through the waves, the cowardly fisherman
hides behind his wife. (...) Nowadays, the doe is braver than the lion.\textsuperscript{115}

These scenes can be interpreted as the fishermen trying to cope with Mbanick’s death and Yatma’s marriage, something that has necessarily disrupted the kinship rhizome, by referring to their spiritual beliefs for reassurance. By combining their metaphorical dialogue and close-ups of their handiwork, the film suggests a close connection between spiritual belief and kinship in the village.

Nevertheless, the point at which this bond between Lebou spirituality and kinship is most apparent occurs near the end of the film, when Yatma performs as a lion during a simb event.\textsuperscript{116} The scene and Yatma’s performance draw attention to two simultaneous processes involving kinship and spirituality. The first process entails the healing of the village’s kinship rhizome due to Yatma’s addressing of his violent nature that led to the loss of Mbanick. The crowd gathers around Yatma to witness his taming by the griot and to clap and laugh along as he finally surrenders his beastly behaviour and dances along to the drumming. Since Yatma acknowledges his fatal rage through his performance, his audience, the villagers, have the right circumstances to express their judgement of his past behaviour through socially acceptable actions such as booing or running away from him. Consequently, the performance provides a catharsis for both Yatma and the villagers, who have made Yatma aware of their disappointment in him, and both can now move on towards reconciliation. Without the opportunity to channel the spirit of a lion, however, Yatma would have probably struggled for a much longer period to achieve some forgiveness from the villagers. The performance thus becomes a kinship ritual for Yatma and the villagers. It foregrounds the necessity of spiritual belief in the rebuilding and sustaining of the village’s kinship rhizome.

\textsuperscript{115} They refer to the fact that Yatma (the lion, as per his ancestor’s story) is afraid to go out to sea because of Mbanick’s spirit (the shark).

\textsuperscript{116} Simbs are a Lebou/Wolof form of paid entertainment during which a performer transforms themselves into a lion and attacks non-paying spectators, while a griot and a sabar drummer provide commentary (Tang 2007: 149-50). Although simbs are seen merely as an entertaining event, in the past they were considered to have more ritualistic undertones, whereby the performer was ‘seen as truly taking on the spirit of the lion and “becoming” a lion’ (Tang 2007: 149).
The second process happening in this scene is that of Yatma engaging in a spiritual ritual that connects him with his ancestors and allows him to assert his kinship identity. The film purposefully shows Yatma performing in the simb event, which is otherwise meant for entertainment, in order to draw attention to the proximity between spiritual and kinship identities. Yatma transforms himself into a lion, the symbol of his lineage and a point of connection with his great ancestor, and through his transformation he is able to express his innermost feelings of both rage and shame (see Figure 12). As a result of this, his identity as Yatma fuses with his spiritual beliefs and his kinship identity as the descendant of the ‘lineage of the lion’. Religious historian Laura S. Grillo describes this combining of identities when she claims that in African spirituality,

> ritual is not just “symbolic”. It transforms practitioners, by eliciting direct bodily ways of knowing. (...) Through its appeal to the senses and the sensational nature of the experience that it elicits, ritual reveals alternate realities and new modes of being. (Grillo 2012: 114)

Grillo suggests that during rituals, spiritual belief finds a physical expression through the body, thus enabling the body of the performer to find kinship with entities that are otherwise inaccessible to it. The spiritual belief is crucial to this process of creating structures of kinship because without it, Yatma’s body cannot disassociate itself from his own human form. For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘this is becoming-animal in action, the production of the molecular animal (whereas the “real” animal is trapped in its molar form and subjectivity)’ (1988: 275). Despite the terminology that leans towards the scientific, Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge the possibility of transformative experience in which bodies become other to themselves. Crucially, however, they theorize ‘becoming-animal’ as something that is empirically imperceptible, meaning that finding of kinship with other entities can be thought of as occurring in the invisible, spiritual realm.
In light of Deleuze’s writing on ‘becoming’ and the virtual, the spiritual and kinship identities of the characters in _Ndeysaan_ are arguably impossible to separate. If the spiritual realm in _Ndeysaan_ can be likened to what Deleuze describes as the virtual, and the virtual is, as Bogue notes, ‘the domain of pure becoming’ (2010: 21), then there can be no becoming or finding kinship without entering the spiritual realm. Furthermore, kinship itself can be theorized as originating within the spiritual realm, or the virtual. Deleuze distinguishes the virtual as ‘an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field’ (1990: 102), in other words an environment where existence has not been separated into distinct forms and therefore everything is kin. It is from this place that kinship identity arises and where kinship rhizomes begin to form, although not to the extent of crystallizing into actual structures. The film nods towards this understanding of spirituality and kinship in its last scene, after Yatma has drowned in the same spot as Mbanick. The face of grown-up Amul is superimposed on his face as a child witnessing the drowning as he concludes that Mbanick’s, Yatma’s and Maxoye’s stories were swept away into the ocean. This is followed by another superimposed image of the sea that, due to the use of a taupe camera filter, completely blends in with the sky. The final image suggests a vast, nondescript continuum that swallows up characters and their stories and turns them into a part of itself, sounding rather like the ‘pre-individual transcendental field’ defined by Deleuze as the virtual. Hence, through their loss of physical bodies in the ocean, the protagonists join the spiritual realm and they become kin once again.
*Ndeysaan* and *Timbuktu* can be interpreted as relying on the concept of the rhizome to outline the relationship between kinship identities and spirituality/religious identities. In *Timbuktu*, the rhizome mimics the kinship network and extends it across to the town inhabitants with shared religious identities. The rhizome provides a vital point of survival and kinship identity for the characters in *Timbuktu*, which is why the Islamists target it in their attempt to create a hierarchy, a root, with themselves at the top. In *Ndeysaan*, kinship identities are also under threat from a manipulating elder and the imam but this threat is addressed by both the villagers and Yatma, using their spirituality to do so. Yatma then proceeds to reassert his kinship with his ancestors and recuperate his standing in the village by approximating the spiritual realm through a ritual performance. Both films treat the relationship between kinship identities and spirituality/religious identities as crucial for the survival and wellbeing of the characters in an otherwise hostile environment. Nevertheless, the female characters in both films undergo the most adverse situations, thus urging questions about how and why do spiritual/religious issues affect female character more severely than male characters in these films.

### 4.4 Spirituality/religious identity and gender identity: empowerment, hindrance, or both?

This last section of the chapter will continue to explore representations of spirituality/religious identities but with reference to the representation of gender identities in the two films. Though the connection between gender identity and ethnic identity is more fully discussed in the previous chapter, gender identity will be explored here in relation to spirituality in order to highlight the intersectional nature of identity representation. While in *Timbuktu*, the combination of female characters’ gender and religious identities empowers them in their resistance to the Islamist regime, the female protagonist in *Ndeysaan* remains powerless and isolated from the spiritual realm due to her gender.

In her critique of the last scene of *Ndeysaan*, Alexie Tcheuyap points out that Maxoye suffers the most out of any character in the story:
[She] has lost two husbands and is left with two orphans. Her fate is arguably more tragic than that of her two dead husbands. At the end of the film, she has become the most popular widow who causes men to kill each other. In that sense, one can state that Ndeysaan is not particularly feminist. (2011:145)

Tcheuyap is correct in identifying the lack of a feminist perspective in the film or, more accurately, the lack of a progressive feminist perspective. In the previous chapter, I have discussed at length some of the types of feminism in Africa, with a particular emphasis on Africana Womanism, and whether these branches of feminism are being adopted by filmmakers in West Africa. Africana Womanism presents itself as feminism rooted in the African female experience, controversially for Western feminists naming motherhood and family as the most central part of this experience. These values are undoubtedly represented in Ndeysaan, where the female protagonist Maxoye not only bears a child to a man she loves, she also marries and bears another child to another man, after her first partner dies. Maxoye’s most significant roles in the film are indeed those of a mother and a wife, thus complying with the description of African female experience as set out by Africana Womanism. It follows that the film is feminist, contrary to what Tcheuyap claims, if the particular feminism in consideration is Africana Womanism, and not other forms of African feminism.

However, when interpreted from a feminist perspective other than Africana Womanism, Ndeysaan becomes problematic, not least because Maxoye has no agency in the story. She marries Yatma because Peer Njay, Yatma’s father and leader of the village, arranges it and she loses both of her partners because she is never allowed to intervene in their row, regardless of the fact that it is her life that will be the most affected. The only decisions she makes are those of sexual consent. While it is commendable that she retains power over her body, this fact only further promotes her portrayal as a woman with a desirable body rather than a woman who decides her own fate. There is a sense in the film that fate is the preserve of men because they are the ones who are allowed to make decisions
about matters of significance to themselves and to the rest of the village. Predominantly, these important matters rely on the men’s knowledge of and proximity to the spiritual realm (the persistent fog over the sea, the shark’s attacks), suggesting that women in this film, including Maxoye, are somehow isolated from the spiritual realm due to their lack of agency.

Moreover, the film fails to establish the background for Maxoye’s spirituality as the female lead character. On the evening when Mbanick and Yatma share their ancestor stories with their friends, Maxoye is never encouraged to share hers. Instead, she is offered by one of her friends as a prize (‘prettiest girl in the village’) for the man with the best storytelling skills. The film presents an individual’s ancestry as a key to his spirituality, so when neither Maxoye nor any other female character discuss their ancestor stories, it appears as if they cannot tap into their spirituality. Also, after Mbanick and Yatma die, Maxoye is the sole link that saves both of their family lineages from extinction, meaning that she plays a crucial role in the ancestor histories of two clans. Despite her significance, the story is not narrated from her point of view and it is not narrated by her descendants, which might at least portray her as an ancestor and thus a spiritual entity. Maxoye is therefore never allowed to reach spirituality through her kinship identity or through any other means. Without a developed spirituality, Maxoye’s character looks rather two-dimensional compared to the two male protagonists, drawing our attention to the fact that spirituality in this film is a tool to create a more well-rounded male character, while female characters are left to develop through motherhood.

In Ifi Amadiume’s words, ‘the traditional power of African women had an economic and ideological basis, which derived from the importance accorded motherhood’ (2001: 112), and therefore Maxoye does not possess any power, spiritually or practically, until she becomes a mother herself. This argument would certainly align with Africana Womanism, the tenets of which rest on the importance of motherhood and spirituality in the fight for African women’s equality (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 2006: 69). Nevertheless, after she gives birth to Mbanick’s son, Maxoye remains disconnected from the spiritual occurrences in and around the
village. In one particular shot, before she forgives Yatma for what he did to Mbanick, Maxoye looks out to the sea, presumably to seek some reassurance from Mbanick’s spirit. Unlike the scene at the beginning of the film, where men looked out to the sea and their spiritual connection to it was made apparent from the film’s editing and mise-en-scène, when Maxoye looks out to the sea there is very little to suggest any form of spiritual connection. The brightness of the sea provides a striking contrast to the darkness of the hut, its window providing the foreground of the shot from which the sea can be seen (see Figure 13). Maxoye’s face looking out and the hut’s window form a frame within the frame, distinctly separating her from the sea and thus suggesting the absence of a spiritual connection.

Motherhood therefore does not afford Maxoye access to spirituality, contrary to what Amadiume claims. In fact, Ndeysaan depicts motherhood as the only surviving bond between Maxoye and the men she cannot be with and who cannot help her take care of the children. In that sense, motherhood becomes quite a burden for Maxoye, who could otherwise continue to live her life more independently of what happened with Mbanick and Yatma. The film goes against the Africana Womanist theory that motherhood is what gives women empowerment by showing how motherhood can cause more issues for the woman if she is left without a partner. And dependence on a male partner is a notion that very few branches of feminism would advocate.

In light of these observations, it is imperative to ask whether Ndeysaan’s depiction of women as lacking spirituality represents the general attitudes of the

![Figure 13 Maxoye looks out to the sea](image-url)
society shown on screen or whether it has been influenced by the filmmaker’s gender bias. Lebou novelist Mariama Mbengue Ndoye has written extensively about Lebou oral history and rituals in her unpublished thesis and she has established the study of oral history as a credible evidence of Lebou social and religious values (1981: 365-366). In recording Lebou rituals, Ndoye showcases just how much these rituals rely on and are organized by women. This is further illustrated by Marame Gueye in her article on Wolof117 wedding ceremonies, where she draws a line between the administrative side of ceremonies usually fulfilled by men, and the ritualistic side which is the domain of women (2010: 68). Both authors emphasize the fact that in polygamous societies, such as the Lebou and the Wolof, female voices and power are often muted (Gueye 2010: 65-66) and women are stereotyped as being fragile and timid (Ndoye 1981: 221). Nevertheless, their writing points to the fact that it is women who often take charge in ceremonies and rituals, contrary to the stereotypes about them, implying that their spirituality is equal if not superior to those of men. It is therefore possible that Ndeysaan more or less captures the Lebou attitudes towards gender. However, since the film is not critical of such attitudes and stereotypes of women, it also reveals the filmmaker’s personal bias as a Lebou man. When added to the points regarding female character agency and the theme of motherhood, Ndeysaan and its director can be seen as diminishing the spirituality of the female characters.

Additionally, examining female identities through the prism of spirituality has further confirmed the weaknesses of Africana Womanism as a branch of feminism oriented at women of African descent. One particular weakness found through this process is that of uncritical reliance on values inherent in what is described as ‘African culture’ (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 2006: 70). The emphasis by Africana Womanism on the centrality of family and the importance of motherhood might be emancipatory in some contexts but it loses its power if applied in a society where motherhood is the only thing expected of women. Even if motherhood is imbued

117 The Wolof are very closely related to the Lebou and share many aspects of their ethnic cultures (Shoup 2011: 163-164).
with spiritual power in some of these societies it does not necessarily give women further equality with men, spiritual or practical.

Unlike Sora Wade, Sissako, the director of *Timbuktu*, focuses intensely on female characters and gives them a lot of space to express their spirituality. This is partly due to the fact that religion and spirituality are among the film’s main themes, whereas *Ndeysaan* approaches spirituality in a more subtle way. Nevertheless, the difference in female characters’ exposition between the two films is substantial. *Timbuktu* repeatedly uses the female body to show the harshness of the Islamist regime and it gives women the voice in dialogues to express their anger and dissatisfaction with having to bear the most humiliation from the terrorists. The leading female character, Satima, with her acute intuition and willingness to speak her mind, demonstrates the multiplicity of her identity and thus destabilizes the patriarchal attitudes held by the Islamists. She is an example of a female character that displays multiple forms of identity other than gender identity, showcasing how these identities intertwine, as well as how they affect her actions. Overall, *Timbuktu* has female characters that are far more involved in the matters of spirituality and religion than *Ndeysaan*’s female protagonists.

Firstly, it is female characters in *Timbuktu* that bear the brunt of the Islamists’ regime. The discrimination against them seems to be rooted in Islamic doctrine, aiming to create discord between the characters’ gender and religious identities. Yet, the women are not scared away by the men’s rules to limit their freedom; they are confident in their understanding of their religion and what it teaches about being a Muslim woman. In one scene early on in the film, a group of Islamists tells a woman selling fish at the market to put gloves on because they find seeing her hands indecent. The woman becomes understandably angry, she says she was raised in honour by her parents and then tells the men to cut off her hands if it offends them so much. The scene begins with her sitting down and taking up very little space within the frame but as she grows irritated, she stands up to face the men and together with her friend they occupy a half of the frame with their bodies. What started as a verbal intimidation by the men is quickly turned into a physical
threat from the market woman. The camera cuts to her bare hands holding a knife as the men appear visibly confused and unwilling to do what she tells them to. Even though the men are holding the triggers of the guns over their shoulders, they do not look the woman in the eye and they back away from her slightly. Not only does the scene show that women’s bodies are being targeted, it also allows the female character to reclaim the decision-making regarding her body which intimidates the men, despite the fact that they have guns. The market woman’s confidence about being dressed acceptably for a Muslim, about knowing her religion well, is ultimately what scares these men.

The altercation at the market reveals a wide rift between the female character’s religious identity and the Islamists’ perception of her religious identity based on her gender. This is a far more general problem in the Muslim world, one where Islam as it is described in the Qur’an is subject to interpretation bias. Islamic studies scholar Yushau Sodiq notes that

Islam itself encourages women to be educated, developed, and progressive, yet the males do not give them an ample chance to develop themselves. (2012: 333)

At its face value, Sodique writes, Islam sees women as equals to men but this idea can be lost when interpreted by Muslim scholars and religious leaders who lean towards a patriarchal order (Sodiq 2012: 333). Furthermore, the gender bias in the interpretation of the Qur’an also depends on the culture in which Islam is being interpreted: Sodiq hints at the influence of Arab culture on the deterioration of African Muslim women’s status (2012: 332), while Barbara Calloway and Lucy Creevey highlight the role of West African kinship politics (1994: 31). Regardless of the source of the gender bias, these misinterpretations serve to eventually create a schism between African Muslim women’s identity based on their gender, and the identity they create for themselves based on their religion. The female characters in Timbuktu are harassed through restrictions on expressing their gender identity, the restrictions clearly appealing to their religious identity. It is not long until this dissonance between identities becomes unbearable and the market woman
appears again. In her second scene, however, she is crying, unable to utter more than two short sentences about her desire to leave. The camera now films her from a high angle, still wearing a chador rolled up around her bare arms but the angle of the camera betrays her discomfort. Her reluctance to suppress one form of her identity over another has resulted in paranoia about being watched. She needs to leave in order to be able to balance again the multiple aspects of her identity.

This idea that there exists a balance and a flow between multiple forms of identity in one individual can eventually be reconciled with Deleuze’s thoughts on identity, difference, and multiplicity. Deleuze posits that rather than thinking about identity as being the defining feature of an individual, we ought to think in terms of difference (2004: 91) or as Deleuze scholar James Williams summarizes it, define ‘difference as the condition of identity but not as a foundation or a limit’ (2013: 62). If difference is the condition of identity, then identity can also be thought of as being composed of multiple forms, each one different but interconnected, each form evolving on its own and as a part of the whole. In that sense, an individual’s identity can actually be a multiplicity, akin to a rhizome. Deleuze describes multiplicities as flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions: we will therefore speak of a plane of consistency of multiplicities, even though the dimensions of this “plane” increase with the number of connections that are made on it. Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. (1987: 9)

The plasticity of multiplicities, their ability to grow into new dimensions, is comparable with the development of an individual’s identity when exposed to new environments and situations. Moreover, Deleuze claims multiplicities are defined by the outside, for instance by the line of flight; becoming is a line of flight and new identities are often forged by becoming (becoming-woman, becoming-animal, etc.). Becomings allow identities to change and connect the individual with other, new
sets of identities. Thus, it is possible to think of an individual’s identity as a Deleuzian multiplicity if we localize the concept of identity in the context of difference rather than in a fixed repetition.

Using the concept of multiplicity in order to understand identity can also further illuminate the analysis of the female characters’ identities in Timbuktu. In one scene, Satima is washing her hair outside of the tent when Abdelkerim (Abel Jafri) and his driver pull up in a car, having figured out that her husband is not at home. Abdelkerim, obviously infatuated with Satima, tells her to cover her head because it is indecent but she replies: ‘If he dislikes it, he shouldn’t look at it. A man who harms a woman is impious.’ Abdelkerim sees Satima as merely a woman and as such he believes she should do what other women he knows do. However, Satima’s identity is a multiplicity; she is a woman but she is also a Tuareg and a Muslim, so when Abdelkerim tries to diminish her on the basis of her gender identity, Satima’s response references religion, another form of her identity. By demonstrating that her identity is a multiplicity, Satima undermines the patriarchy inherent in the fixing of her identity on just her gender appearance. As Bogue phrases it,

the path of resistance to oppressive power relations is not simply through struggle with dominant authorities but also through subversion of the categories we live by, an unfixing of identities and inauguration of a process of metamorphosis. (2010: 20)

Both Satima and the market woman resist the Islamists not just by physical force, they also combat their oppression through having more than one form of identity. These multiple identities keep evolving, affecting each other, reacting to the environment, in a constant line of flight.

Finally, Timbuktu emphasizes the fact that identity can be a multiplicity by making a distinction between the female characters’ bodies and their voices. Upon being found in breach of the Islamists’ ban on music, a man and a woman (Fatoumata Diawara) are put on trial and receive a punishment of eighty lashes each. During the trial, the camera first frames the woman’s hands dressed in black
gloves, and as the woman slowly sits down, the immobile camera shoots the length of her chador and then her tightly wrapped face. She does not speak to the judge, only nods and looks down. At this moment, most of her identity is repressed, hidden under the black fabric, only her face reveals that she is a woman. This confirms Bogue’s claim that oppression works by fixing and limiting identities (2010:20). Nevertheless, when the woman is being lashed, her cries of pain change into a song in Bambara, in defiance of those punishing her. In other words, she uses her voice to not only express her resistance but also to affirm that her identity goes beyond that which she physically represents.

The analysis of *Ndeysaan* and *Timbuktu* in this part of the chapter reveals a link between gender identities and spirituality/religious identities that is significant for the discussion about African feminisms. With its limiting portrayal of the female protagonist’s agency, *Ndeysaan* complicates the notion in some African feminisms which locates female power in motherhood and spirituality. For the female protagonist, spirituality becomes yet another area of her life that she does not have access to, highlighting the film’s problematic stance on gender equality. *Timbuktu*, however, joins the female characters’ religious and gender identities in order to present them as three-dimensional characters with multiple identities that interlace. The women in this film can rely on the multiplicity of their identities to not be completely encased in their roles as mothers and wives, though these roles are still important to them. In that sense, *Timbuktu* can be classified as an African feminist film.

In conclusion, representations of spirituality and religious identities reveal the complex, mutually dependent dynamic between the various aspects of identities represented in *Ndeysaan* and *Timbuktu*. In *Ndeysaan*, the importance placed on knowing one’s ancestors creates a strong link between the characters’ spirituality and ethnic and kinship identities, while also affecting the gender identity of the female protagonist. *Timbuktu* focuses on the way ethnic, kinship and gender identities shape the characters’ religious identities, and on the subsequent frustration of the Islamist invaders whose religious identities are unyielding to other
aspects of their identities. Both films show that spirituality/religious identities rarely operate without relying on elements of ethnic, kinship and gender identities, be it the mythical ethnic past, the kinship networks, or female gender roles. Rather than viewing these representations of spirituality and religious identities in the two films separately, this approach helps illustrate the extent to which religious belief and spirituality are incorporated into the identity structures represented in Francophone West African film. This way, the interdependence and specificity of identities represented in the above films remain foregrounded in the discussion about Francophone West African cinemas.
Conclusion

This thesis set out to analyse the representations of ethnic, kinship, gender identities and spirituality in a number of contemporary Francophone West African films, in an effort to highlight the continuing significance of these local ways of belonging. In the process, it identified some areas in which interpretations of these representations overlap with Eurocentric notions of belonging, such as nationality, class or religious identities, as well as illuminated some areas where those notions do not apply. In Chapter One, I proposed to focus on ethnic identity representation in films that patently position themselves as commentaries on the current place of ethnic identities in the West African countries of Mali and Burkina Faso. The conclusion of this chapter suggests that there is still a need to consider ethnic identity, despite the resistance to this in Marxism and postcolonial theory, because the films from these countries portray it. Chapter Two revealed that while the class system has a growing influence on the representation of social status in the selected films, West African social hierarchies still have an overwhelming impact on the characters’ social status. In Chapter Three, I found that feminist analyses of Francophone West African films must be sensitive to their specific cultural context, in order not to stigmatize the female characters for the fact that their gender identities are also shaped by their ethnic identities. Chapter Four then concluded with even more emphasis on the intersectionality of identities, by examining how representations of spirituality and religious identities inform and are informed by other aspects of identity in the films. Chapters Two, Three and Four thus adopted an approach grounded in intersectionality because it is not possible to look at the individual identity components in isolation, since the films also portray these components as connected to ethnic identity. Therefore, the main conclusion of this thesis is that the local ways of belonging and the practices, rituals and beliefs which these identities rely on continue to have vital significance for representation in Francophone West African cinemas.
The thesis has explored the possible approaches to analysing representations of local identities, and in many cases, the film analysis builds on strategies used to identify Eurocentric notions of identity. This is due to the fact that Francophone West African filmmakers adapt dominant cinematic codes for expression of national identity to signify the more local modes of belonging. In the instance of representation of ethnic identities, this translates into long shots of spatial settings that hold significant value for the ethnic group in question, regardless of whether these are landscapes, landmarks, or a particular architectural style, such as in the example of the Sudanese-style mosque in *Timbuktu*.

Another consistent signs of ethnic identity representations are the films’ temporal settings and narrative structures. Bhabha notes the interplay between the past and the present that determines the continuous construction of national identities, while Okpewho demonstrates that myth is the medium that allows African ethnic groups to renegotiate their ethnic identities. These two processes fuse in the *griot*’s practice of storytelling, which is in turn adopted as a narrative device by a number of Francophone West African filmmakers. Storytelling is seen as a defining trait of the films coming out of this region, but rather than it being assigned to cultural specificity, the thesis argues it should be understood as the key mode of construction and negotiation of ethnic identities. Several of the films use the narrative framework of a *griot*’s story to enter into a non-linear conception of time, in which the mythical past comes to the surface of the present. Storytelling in the films is thus a means of consulting ethnic histories in order to make them relevant to contemporary settings, conveying ethnic identities in the process. Since the narrative device of *griot* storytelling is listed by scholars as one of the characteristic features of Francophone West African films, its relation to ethnic identity shown in this thesis should also be more widely acknowledged.

Additionally, the use of cinematic codes to communicate local hierarchies of power, dependent on kinship and gender, is also a noteworthy finding in this thesis. The films use camera angles and framing to subtly outline the power relationships between characters that define their social status within their communities. The
meaning behind these techniques may be lost on an audience which is not familiar with West African power hierarchies, but their inclusion implies that the filmmakers are creating locally specific ways of visually representing social status. Moreover, some of the films also address the positioning of the spectator and the inherent power involved in looking at local societies through a camera lens. Stam and Spence mention that the cinematic apparatus is innately colonial (2004: 880), so by exhibiting their awareness of this impact on audience positioning, Francophone West African filmmakers are able to represent the power relations at play in their films. Not only are these techniques localizing cinematic representation in the specific cultural context of these films, they also draw attention to the fact that previous cinematic representations of West Africa may act as a filter that defines non-African audience’s understanding of the representations in these films.

Chapter Three has also shown how the lack of understanding of the role of ethnic identities in African feminisms can skew the feminist interpretations of Francophone West African films. In avoiding the grounding of feminist film analysis in an informed intersectional approach (that includes ethnic identity), academics who focus on the representations of gender in Francophone West African cinemas might be perpetuating a bias against African branches of feminist thought. The chapter demonstrates another point that has been central in this thesis, and it is the necessity of an intersectional approach to analysing identity representation and to using theoretical frameworks.

Since the films in this thesis examine identities in flux, certain aspects of Deleuzian theoretical work have provided a valuable framework for my thinking about the role of time in representations of ethnic and other identities. In particular, Deleuze’s work on time-image has been instructive to my understanding of how the past and the present interact to negotiate ethnic, kinship and gender identities, while the concepts of ‘becoming’ and ‘rhizome’ have shaped my comprehension of the representations of kinship, gender and religious identities in Chapters Two, Three and Four respectively. These Deleuzian concepts provide a supportive theoretical backbone to the film analysis in the thesis, because they aid the
visualisation of identities in time, in their state of constant flux. More specifically, by using Deleuze’s thought in close connection to local concepts, theories and understandings, this thesis takes an original approach to analysing cinematic representations of identity.

A significant contribution of this thesis is its grounding in an interdisciplinary method of research. In particular, the thesis produces a critique of African cinemas that combines anthropological and ethnographic approaches with film theory and analysis. While these methods of research have their own challenges (the concepts of ‘authenticity’ and Western gaze discussed at length in Chapter One), they have also been key in my comprehending and drawing attention to the representations of ethnic identities in the selected films.

In terms of the obstacles I have faced as a researcher in the field of African film studies, the restricted accessibility of film material in the UK and in Europe in general has been one of the main issues in this research. Through the at times frustrating process of locating DVDs and VHS copies scattered across research institutions in the UK I have learned that the limits on research in this field are practical as well as theoretical. The distribution of most of the titles coming out of this region is still very much dependent on the assessment by the predominantly European-based funding bodies of African cinemas, meaning that only those films that cater to the tastes of European audiences receive distribution rights. However, it has been encouraging to watch the growing online initiatives to make African films available to audiences with access to the internet. In addition to private users of YouTube publishing their copies of African films, which is certainly one of the more questionable methods, June Givanni has started a public funding campaign to make her Pan African Cinema Archive more accessible to the public, and Scotland’s film festival Africa in Motion has established the African Film Database to provide an online platform for African films in the UK. The limited accessibility to African film productions which I have experienced during my research, however, have encouraged me to think about the lack of comprehension in Western academia for the themes that are being represented by these films.
Apart from the restricted access to African films, perhaps the greatest challenge I have encountered when researching this thesis has been the absence of resources looking at specific ethnic groups residing in the countries of Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. In many instances during writing this thesis, I have been unable to locate ethnographic or anthropological data to consult alongside my analysis of the representations of indigenous identities on screen, resulting in a more generalised assessment of these representations. Occasionally, when I have secured specific ethnic data the reference material was outdated, and therefore of problematic value. These obstacles have shed light on some of the academic bias and gaps in Western institutions of knowledge production, namely the fact that research into ethnicities and ethnic identities in Africa is less preferred than research into the development of national identities. With its focus on representations of ethnic identity, this thesis opens up an avenue of research in African film studies which could fill some of the gaps caused by Eurocentric knowledge production.

Finally, the topic and the conclusions of this thesis aim to place it firmly in the debate about the future of African film studies and the decolonisation of academic research in the UK. By studying how Francophone West African films represent local forms of identity, I hope to draw attention to the significance of these identities to the people being represented on screen. Nevertheless, these identities have been neglected in film studies in general, and in African film studies in particular. This neglect calls for a wider discussion about the possible bias in the topics that are being encouraged at UK research institutions and in Western academia.
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