VERSITA

HUMAN AFFAIRS *23*, 7–20, 2013
DOI: 10.2478/s13374-013-0102-z

THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION AND VISIONS OF FREEDOM PERSPECTIVES IN AFRICAN FILMS

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Abstract: In this paper, I will examine how films recreate memories of resistance and define, both visually and in film narration, the difference between imperial aggressors and local protagonists of resistance. The examples are taken from the Brazilian film *Quilombo* that describes the resistance of the 17th and 18th century Maroon communities against the onslaught of the Portuguese colonial powers (political and military). Med Hondo's (Mauretania) *Sarraounia* deals with the resistance in West Africa against the Jihad of the Sokoto Fulani and the (in)famous French "exploratory" expedition under the command of Voulet. Both films are based on "real" histories as they were generally communicated from the colonialist perspective. And both films present themselves as counter-discursive revisions of history. The analysis in this paper focuses on the visual representation of the resistance heroes, first isolating them from the continuity of film narration in a type of still image, thus emphasizing the contrastive imagology between aggression and resistance. In the second step, aggressors and resistors are examined in terms of how they relate socially to their fellow combatants and to their communities. The obvious difference is that the aggressors have no immediate community to relate to socially or emotionally. Particular emphasis is put on the associative and symbolic meanings of the scenic setting, in which the antagonistic characters are placed.

Key words: Historical film in Africa and diaspora; Brazilian Quilombos; Voulet-Chanoine Sahel mission; imagology of historical heroes/heroines.

When the European colonialists started to occupy territories and confiscate land on a large scale, resistance movements sprang up almost everywhere. Charismatic leaders headed the resistance against the intruders: Kijentekile as leader of the Maji Maji movement in Tanganjika, the Xhosa leader Makana in the Cape province, Nehanda in Zimbabwe, and Maharero and Hendrik Witboy in Namibia. An identical pattern of critical discourse on these resistance movements was immediately established in terms of plain reporting or officially documenting the political events: the colonialists, i.e. the victors, dominated the official narratives. The interests of the new colonial powers made it imperative that the leaders of resistance movements should be represented as terrorists and primitive sourcerers. Witchcraft and superstitions about magic rituals that "turned bullets into water" became regular ingredients of these reports. From the beginning the invading aggressors seized control over the narratives and reduced the native population, particularly the leaders, to the level of a "colonial other", i.e. making them appear as savages.

Indigenous, and therefore possibly more authentic reports, started to be told from the very beginning in the unofficial oral lore—in oral histories that were kept alive among the local population and never spread as widely as the official government reports. The colonialist versions became universal, while the indigenous narrative remained local or at best regional. A hundred years later, towards the end of the 20th century, writers, film makers and historians rediscovered and resurrected many of these stories and contrasted them with the "official" histories, with the aim of reconstructing historical realities, or at least of pointing out the different interests inherent in the different perspectives of the narratives, the indigenous versus the colonialist.

The thematic concern of resistance against the colonial conquest or the struggle for liberation provides a historical framework that requires special attention to historical truth and veracity. In Medo Hondo's words, historical themes occupy a prominent place in the work of the African film maker:

> There is an obligation to make such historical films, because of the truth inherent in the story... They [film makers] deserve credit because to beat the odds and create African images from an African perspective to a world audience is a positive engagement (Ukadike 2002, 68).

The genre of the historical film demands special skills and attention to detail on the part of the director. Information about historical facts is gathered either from written documents or popular tradition and oral history. In both cases narrative accounts occur in strictly verbal form. This information has to be reinvented and reconstructed as visual images that can carry the meaning and atmosphere of those visual and dramatic incidents that originally constituted the historic event. The film director assumes the task of a translator, who tries to retranslate back the verbal rendering of events into the original form of the visual idiom (Rosenstone 1959, 170-175). This certainly applies to Med Hondo's historical film *Sarraounia* (1987). Sarraounia is one of those cases where the local narrative with the African perspective remained unseen—the *UNESCO General History of Africa* (vol VII) does not even mention her name—while the official colonialist narrative achieved a scandalous celebrity status as the "Voulet-Chanoine" mission. Captain Voulet and Lieutenant Chanoine were charged with the mission to cross the Sahel from West to East, from Senegal to Lake Chad or even further. It led to a confrontation with the British in Fashoda and influenced French internal policies when the Dreyfus affair was at its hottest: in terms of European policies and French internal policies, the Voulet-Chanoine affair received much critical attention, and as such, it has also been extensively covered by historical and political science research (Taithe 2009).[1]

The military forces of Voulet/Chanoine comprised 9 European officers, 50 Senegalese Tirailleurs, 20 Spahis, 30 interpreters, 400 auxiliaries/mercenaries and 800 porters. Added to this there were women, children, cattle, provisions and more than a million rounds of ammunition. Capt Voulet and Lt Chanoine's method of "exploration" showed unprecedented cruelty and brutality, leaving scorched earth and acquiring a reputation as equally bad as that of the Belgian Congo mission (described in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*). In

[1] Taithe summarises the abundant critical writing on the Voulet/Chanoine affair and provides an exhaustive bibliography.

the annals of French colonial history the "mission Voulet-Chanoine" (1896-1899) acquired the highest reputation as a "chronique scandale", since Voulet not only rejected his original mission in open rebellion, but he even killed his superior commander, "lieutenant-colonel Klobb, résident de Tombouctou" in order to complete his mission of conquest as a purely personal endeavour, thus revealing his egomania and colonialist megalomania (Janvier 1958, 86-100).

In this situation, Sarraounia, the leader of the Azna people refused to hand over her territory and challenged Voulet to a military confrontation.

As late as 1976, Jacques-Francis Rolland published his fictionalised biography of Voulet, *Le grand capitaine, "un livre dont le but est de sauver de l'oublie un aventurier de l'épopée colonial"*.

Abdoulaye Mamani, whose novel provided most of the material for Med Hondo's film script, directly addressed Rolland's

> épopée colonial, vu due côté européen par un Européen, et de l'autre, un Africain, engage politiquement et artistiquement, à la recherché d'un modèle de fièrté et de résistence dans un culture local (Tidjani Alou 2005, 55).

Abdoulaye Mamani takes up the challenge of Rolland's colonialist perspective and practically engages in a dialogue between his own indigenous version and Rolland's imperialist version of history. While Rolland refers to Sarraounia's fortified town Lougou as "*un trou de bêtes sauvages*" (Rolland 1976, 14), Mamani strives to show that "*le Niger précolonial n'était qu'un milieu frustre sans stratégie politico-militaire, sans valeurs propres, qu'elles soient architecturales, domestiques ou vestimentaires*" (Tidjani Alou 2005, 66). Abdoulaye Mamani and Med Hondo wanted to achieve for Niger what Achebe had declared was the chief task of the African writer, namely to show readers that "precolonial Africa was not an endless night of savagery."

Med Hondo and Abdoulaye Mamani developed the film script for *Sarraounia* together, departing from the research that Mamani had already conducted for his novel (Abdoulaye Mamani 1988). They engaged in extensive research into the oral tradition:

> I began work by doing research with older people residing in Niger while Mamani continued with his writing. We talked with the inhabitants who knew the history, we spent about one and a half years just meeting with people in towns and villages all over the country, talking about Sarraounia, and also meeting the Sarraounia of today....the tradition has been preserved in memory as it is maintained in history...we went and talked with her (present Sarraounia), and with the people, to obtain the information we needed before shooting in order to be respectful to the traditions and customs of the people. We were very concerned with historical accuracy (Ukadike 2002, 69).

In their work they managed to combine not only a portrayal of two completely different personalities—queen Sarraounia on the one side and Captain Voulet on the side of the French colonialists, creating two characters standing for opposing concepts of military and political leadership—but they also thematised the cultural differences in recording history. One kind of history is based on written documents and therefore labelled "official or formal history", and the other is history based on oral narration and memory, therefore often discarded as

"informal history" or folklore.[2] In the visual medium of film, the difference between these two concepts is obliterated.

Although the film "*Sarraounia* reconstructs and reinterprets—perhaps even reinvents—an important and tragic period in the history of West Africa...[it] is based on actual events that *transpired* in Niger..."(Mbye Cham 2004, 64). Ignored in the official histories of West Africa, the Queen of the Aznas is very much present in oral stories and in the collective memory of the people in Niger, and not simply as a figure of popular lore.

Med Hondo insists on the importance of oral traditions. He gave a prominent role in the film to the griot (Abdoulaye Cissé who composed the music, plays the Kora and the Griot), who marks the decisive events of the story through his recitations of praise poems. But even these praise songs reveal a duality and ambiguity in appreciation. The very first song opens with the words "Sarraounia whom I fear and respect, Sarraounia whom I love because she is my queen." Med Hondo gives absolute priority to the popular oral tradition of historical narration, thus centralising the African perspective, the African subject position. He reverses the old formula of the "film of Africa" where the Alan Quatermaines performed their heroic deeds as colonisers against the background of a picturesque African landscape, swarming with wildlife and cunning or docile natives. The African queen Sarraounia is Med Hondo's answer to John Huston's *African Queen* with Katherine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. He positions his queen and the people of Azna centre stage and marginalises the Voulet-Chanoine gang to the restricted role of bad boys who are alienated from their natural environment. A reading that understands Sarraounia simply as a reversal of the Hollywood Africa films is, however, too simplistic.

Med Hondo narrates the life of Sarraounia in three episodes. Chronologically, the first episode (told as flashback) deals with Sarraounia's childhood, youth and her education. Sarraounia was orphaned and raised by a stepfather/tutor, who prepares her for her future role as ruler of the Aznan people. He teaches her not only the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic), but also martial arts, archery, military tactics, and strategic planning and action, which enables her to command her army. In addition she was taught public address/rhetoric, diplomacy, management techniques, and how to conduct meetings for her role as political and cultural leader. For this didactic dialogue, Med Hondo chose a steady eye-level camera position that depicts tutor and tutored on equal footing, suggesting an atmosphere of equality and mutual respect. He also teaches Sarraounia herbal medicine and healing—with the emphasis on the pharmacological aspects of the ingredients of plants, and nothing about the ritualistic mannerisms of traditional healers. And he also teaches her contraceptive methods. The camera is always kept at eye level, sometimes looking over Sarraounia's shoulder when training her marksmanship in archery. The viewer automatically adopts Sarraounia's perspective. The entire training of Sarraounia appears totally rational and pragmatic, nothing shamanic and nothing that points towards sorcery or witchcraft, for which the Muslim Tirrailleurs and the Fulani camel riders feared her so much.

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[2] Med Hondo speaks about his acknowledgement of oral sources in his Interview with Francoise Pfaff in Harrow (1997, 151-158) and Abdoulaye Mamani (1990, 51-80).

But the tutor reveals a secret that sets Sarraounia apart from other people, from other women: she was raised "not on human milk"—something like Macbeth's "unnatural" birth by caesarean—and she will not bear children. And the tutor adds

> Ton corps ne connaîtra jamais les affres de l'enfanteinement…..quand le moment sera venu, tu connaîtras l'homme comme ton serviteur et non comme ton maître (Mamani1988, 23).

Sarraounia's education strengthens her various roles as military leader and political-cultural leader of her people—this comes closest to the concept of the "male daughter". Her potential role as woman/wife or possibly mother is left in the dark (Tidjani Alou 2005, 56).

Med Hondo created specific images, specific visual icons, that establish the three roles of Sarraounia. The role of daughter and wife emphasises conventional female attributes. This role is confined to indoor spaces, to the private rooms in Sarraounia's palace, and thus contrasts clearly with her public roles in an open, public setting. Her attire seems to inscribe her femininity through precious materials, jewellery and elaborate hair style. But it is also in this "female" location that Sarraounia tells off her suitor and commanding officer of her army when he attempts to impose his views of military strategy on her. Sarraounia does not allow herself to be dominated by any male—not her suitor and not a military officer. The "female" location of the private rooms is revoked again later when Voulet and his men search Sarraounia's royal palace for booty. For them, the richness of the dresses, jewellery and decoration which they find in the palace can be understood only in one sense: that Sarraounia is an over-sexed temptress—another luxurious version of their own sexist concept of African women.

The second phase of Sarraounia's life deals with the first instance of her putting her leadership qualities into practice when she has to ward off an attack by the Fulani Jihadists. The episode opens with a long shot along an alley leading towards the town of Lougou: a young warrior had been put on guard on the hills outside town. He comes running towards the camera shouting: *The Fulani are coming*.

We next see Aznas troops deployed in the forest, lying in ambush, waiting to catch the Fulanis unawares on their heavy camels. Med Hondo shows Sarraounia as part of the guerrilla tactics. The camera looks up at Sarraounia, sitting high up in a tree as a sniper, making use of her marksmanship as an expert archer. Significantly, Sarraounia is wearing the mask that defines her as the military commander (Picton 2002, 57-60).

To present Sarraounia as warrior, Med Hondo prefers a "Western Style" frame, i.e. a medium range, low camera angle shot. He shows Sarraounia in a three quarters portrait, sitting on horseback, her weapon at the ready. The lens looks up at her against the sky, against a forest backdrop, against rugged rocks or among the village huts. The "Western Style" frame enhances the impression of the power and strength inherent in the protagonist, but this does not necessarily mean that Sarraounia is shown as "larger than life" as Manthia Diawara suggests (1989, 110-128).[3] It is the backdrop, the natural or architectural environment, that conveys the close association of the protagonist with warfare and with ambushes, resistance and guerrilla tactics. In many of the warrior takes, Sarraounia wears a mask; a feature of

[3] "Casting Sarraounia in a larger than life role is important because it shows that African women were active in the war against colonialism" (Diawara 1989, 118).

depersonalisation. The mask inscribes the particular functions and symbolic and ritualistic meanings for which the protagonist stands. Normally the "western frame" portrait reinforces the individuality and the heroic posture of the protagonist.

The transition from the images of the warrior to those of the warrior queen, i.e. the representation of the political and military leader, is deliberately fluid. The composition and conception of the images differs slightly from the "pure warrior" images. The range is longer, thus providing full body portraits of Sarraounia as a figure integrated into an architectural, social, and environmental context.

The most interesting take is the one that shows the victory celebrations over the Fulani army at the central plaza in Lougou, the capital of the Aznan people. The meeting place is constructed like an amphitheatre. The people are assembled for the victory celebrations, the highlight of the event is a wrestling match, Sarrounia will officially honour the winner of the match—wrestling is one of the warlike sports that underlines martial virtues of agility, strength and tactical cleverness. The praise singer is there along with an orchestra of drums and balafons; there is singing, chanting, and jubilation when the warrior queen appears on the top rank of the amphitheatre in royal robes, her face hidden behind her warrior mask. Only after being seated in the very middle of the assembly does she slowly lower her mask and thus transform into the civilian queen. Med Hondo seems to attribute a specific symbolic meaning to this transition from masked face to individual face. The mask stands for an abstract, ritualised concept of warriorship, whose symbolic importance is fully understood and appreciated by the people of Azna. The masked warrior queen is the figure to whom the soldiers in the army look to for leadership and guidance, for attack or retreat. The warrior queen's unmasking herself provides an individual face to the abstract concept of military bravery. The personalised view of the queen adds emotional warmth and enforces the close relationship between the queen and her people. The sequence of takes in the filmic narration in this scene: the appearance of the queen; jubilation; unmasking; wrestlers warming up; the wrestling match; prize awarded by the queen; music; cheering and praise singing by the griot, depicts the social fabric of the Aznan community, its social coherence, cultural values and the functioning of social rituals in a condensed and graphic form. Most of the takes are medium-range shots that show the queen in relation to her social environment.

Taking down her mask comes as a close-up, the long sequence of the praise singer as a medium-range shot/counter shot, alternating between the griot, showing how he put emotion and admiration into his performance, and the reaction of the queen. The praise poem appears strangely unflattering, emphasising very much the psychological power—*viz.* charisma—of the queen.

> Je t'aime parce que tu es mon amante de nuit
> J'ai peur de toi parce que tu es la grande magicienne
> Je te respecte parce que tu es ma reine
> Je t'adore parce que tu es mon seigneur
> Je te glorifie parce que tu es la plus forte
> Tu es l'oeil de l'honneur des Aznas
> Douce Sarraounia aux griffes de fer
> Tu brises tes enemies aussi sur que
> La panthère brise les os de sa proie. (Mamani 1988, 12)

To close the episode about the Fulani Jihad attack, Med Hondo presents us with images of a queen who occupies a place in the middle of the community. During the impending attack by the French forces, the image of the political leader keeps recurring. The setting alternates from inside to outside the town walls; it shifts from the central plaza of Lougou to the reconnoitering outposts. We see the queen in the full-body portrait format. She wears battle dress and carries her rifle. Only her hairdo points to femininity here. In contrast to the static camera position in the warrior images, Med Hondo adds an element of movement to his presentation of Sarraounia as the driving spirit of Aznan resistance. Sarraounia moves around inside the town walls from one group of warriors to the next, encouraging them in their preparations for the battle. At the same time the camera also moves, following Sarraounia's circular movement. The camera pans round 360°, thus taking in the entire town as architectural setting, the entire population as social setting, establishing the relationship between the queen and her people, and thus centralising the African perspective and the African subject position against the colonial conquest.

On the eve of the French attack on Lougou, Sarraounia's rhetorically elaborate address to her army and to her people positions her in the historical and theatrical tradition of morale boosting public addresses, e.g. Marc Anthony's famous address before the battle of Philippi in *Julius Caesar* or Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address before the decisive battle of the American Civil war. Sarraounia's public address on the eve of the battle of Lougou resembles closely the address of King Henry V in his camp on the eve of the battle of Agincourt. The importance which is obviously attributed to public address in the culture of Aznan implies that the society is based on a discursive, dialogical interaction between ruler and the ruled, giving priority to the principle of rationality.

In this crucial situation of the nation, Sarraounia takes up again the issue of motherhood, the topic with which her foster father had begun the narrative and determined the direction of Sarraounia's biography. His words, "you will never bear children of your own", define her future career outside the usual confines of the female role as daughter, wife, mother, that limits women to the biological function of reproduction. Sarraounia's role—according to her foster father—will be that of the mother of the nation, without her being the biological mother of many children. In this crucial situation of the imminent French attack, Sarraounia takes up this issue of motherhood in her morale boosting address to her people. She says, "I have not given you children, but I will give you fame and a place in history"[4].

She thus redefines the stereotypical topics of discourse about the female body and the land (*la terre*), or the mother icon, i.e. the reproductive mother as the mother of the nation. Sarraounia's motherhood is non-material, non-biological and her motherhood is spiritual or emotional.

She is giving birth to a national identity, a national history, and providing a place for the nation where she can be seen prominently in the history of Africa. In her role as the masked warrior, she foregrounded the symbolic functions of the warrior/fighter and the ethos of the warrior and his martial virtues. The same happens with her role as political leader when Sarraounia reconceives her role as mother of the nation and as having the abstract function of generating cultural values and the spirit of nationhood.

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[4] The words are taken from the subtitles in the film.

On the eve of the battle that decides the survival of the Azna nation, Med Hondo created images for the various roles of Sarraounia that breathe the spirit of an intact political, cultural, social community. He shows Sarraounia in dialogue with her people, a dialogue in which she argues for support of her policy of resistance against the French. She does not beg for support, she raises questions, she conducts an intellectual and rational debate, and she thus spurs on a political decision made by the people of Azna on the basis of a popular consensus. All the images show Sarraounia in the middle of her people and interacting with her people, or Hondo shows her in the middle of the forest, with the rock ravines integrated into the natural environment. The images are a visual idiom of the philosophies of a nation, organised as a monarchy but operating on the principles of direct grassroots democracy.

The profile of the images of Sarraounia is sharpened by the way in which they contrast with the images concerning the French officers and their African supporters. The first time we see Captain Voulet on the screen, he is riding at the head of his battalion over a little hill top and towards the camera. The camera angle is extremely low. The camera is obviously placed directly at ground level so that we first see the cloud of dust, raised by the French, and then we see their heads popping up behind the hill, followed by the officers appearing in full size, galloping directly into the camera, towards the viewer. Med Hondo uses this extreme low camera position repeatedly in his attempt to illustrate the impact of the invasion and the colonial penetration of African soil. With the low camera angle, Med Hondo automatically expands the immediate foreground of the picture while maintaining a deep focus. He shows in detail the grain of the soil and the nature of the terrain at close range, while the French move forwards from the depths of the picture. Hondo's camera assumes a position of empathy with the soil. The viewer practically looks up from the soil via the camera to the invading soldiers and this stresses their threatening potential.

Med Hondo translates the confrontation between Voulet and Sarraounia into a visual idiom. The images in which the French officers and their mercenaries appear show barren soils, alienated human beings in an inhospitable environment, and an atmosphere of non-belonging and estrangement.

The marching column of the African mercenaries functions as a leitmotif for the French invaders. The camera is kept at the level of the marching feet of the Tirrailleurs, their feet dragging along listlessly, moving towards the camera in two columns, practically taking the camera in their middle like taking a prisoner, while the Tirailleurs are singing in *petit nègre* the song *Franci, Franci*, *Franci est si bon…*The song is simplistic and propagandistic, telling about the beauty of France and saying that France will become the home of the Tirailleurs, taking good care of them. The words of the song, the tune, the music and the shuffling feet, all speak together of the total alienation of the African soldiers. This sequence is repeated several times and signifies the movement of the military column to another location, another massacre, another excess in looting, and robbing and raping.

The first sequence showing Voulet contrasts dramatically with the images created for Sarraounia. We see him (mid range) in his tent with his African concubine, his uniform slightly in disarray. Med Hondo uses this image to raise the crucial issue of the sexual and machoistic implications of the colonial penetration of Africa right from the beginning. All the French officers keep concubines and talk deridingly about them during their all-

male dinners. Among themselves, the concubines also speak with disgust about the sexual preferences of "their" officers. Distributing wives from the captured villages among the tirrailleurs is part of Voulet's tactics to keep his troops in good spirit. He bribes his soldiers with the booty stolen from their own continent.

The composition of the images and particularly their connotative references contrast clearly with the Sarraounia images. Voulet and Chanoine are mostly shown in a confrontational posture, certainly when meeting Africans, mostly when dealing with their own troops, and even when talking among themselves. The visual images of the social fabric of the Voulet mission display an atmosphere of disdain, distrust, coercion, intimidation and brutality. Med Hondo designed the natural environment for Voulet as hostile and refuting. The low camera angle underlines the aspect of barrenness in the natural setting, while the figures move through the natural space in a state of alienation. The most dramatic example is the storm that hits Voulet's troops on the eve of the attack on Sarraounia, when much of the provisions and a large part of the ammunition are lost. The Tirailleurs again attributed this natural calamity to Sarraounia's sorcery and black magic.

Med Hondo designed another sequence about the fear of Sarraounia's magic powers, that is at once revealing and contradictory. When the French and their Tirailleurs enter the town of Lougou, which Sarraounia and her troops have already evacuated, they come across "a fetish", a mask guarding the entrance to the royal compound. The Tirrailleurs refuse to move forward for fear of the magic spell of "*la reine sorcière*".The French officer tries to convince his Tirailleurs how foolish their superstitions are, and that there is no magic spell to harm them. He takes the mask down and puts it on his head to demonstrate that he can brave the magic spell. Immediately he falls into a fit, crying for help, tearing the mask off his face and rolling on the ground whimpering, because the mask had been home to soldier ants that attacked him immediately. The camera work proceeds from long-range takes as they approach the fetish, to a medium-range low camera angle when the officer desecrates the fetish to a close-up (downward camera angle) of the officer rolling in the dust, to show the warrior ants swarming across his face. In one way the officer was able to prove his point—there was no magic spell or magic power, the mishap with the soldier ants proves that it was all simply nature. And yet it seems that immediate retaliation will occur when ritual rules are disregarded. There is no magic spell, but immediate punishment.

Most images testify to the excessive brutality of the French. The "Polo sequence" is notorious. Captured Aznan warriors are shown buried in the dust with only their heads showing above ground. They are then attacked by the French officers, galloping full speed towards the camera, chopping off the heads of the prisoners with their swords as if it were a polo match. The shot is wide angle and long range to show the expanse of the atrocity, mid range with low camera to demonstrate the ferocity of the action, and there is a close-up of the heads to demonstrate the fear of the victims and the senseless brutality. But brutality also reigns within the French group. To prevent desertion, the officers stage a flagellation ritual. This follows the same arrangement as the marching column singing the praises of Franci, except that two soldiers confront each other with their whips. The mutual flagellation is conducted as a military drill, following the same image composition as the marching sequences. The sequence ends with the camera withdrawing and the range gradually lengthening, as a demonstration of the expansive nature of this mass ritual of self inflicted

punishment. This sequence demonstrates, of course, the extent to which the Tirailleurs and the auxiliary soldiers have become estranged from their African identity.

The death of Voulet provides another example of how Med Hondo uses the camera as a biased means of expression—in complete contrast to the objective or neutral camera. Voulet succeeded in capturing and destroying Sarraounia's town Lougou, but he could not really enjoy his victory since Sarraounia escaped and kept engaging him in guerrilla skirmishes. Voulet, the mutineer, sees himself confronted by his own African troops gathering in mutiny against him. They capture Voulet, drag him from his tent out into the open, stage a mock military tribunal trial and execute him. The scene takes place in an open space in the camp with no vegetation, only the dry sand of the desert. We see Voulet at medium range walking towards the firing squad, hoping to regain command over them. His fellow officers watch and do not intervene to rescue Voulet. It remains unclear whether they did not dare to confront the superior forces of the Tirailleurs (eight French officers against hundreds of Africans) or whether they tacitly approved of the verdict that Voulet should die. The camera takes up position behind the firing squad, watches them shoot, then moves close to Voulet, fatally wounded rolling in the dust, making a last attempt to rise to his feet (in close-up) and then the camera focuses on the pool of blood in the sand.

Voulet's death is depicted as cruelly as his military tactics were. He is killed like a dog, with no support and no sympathy, dying in total isolation. The closing sequence of the film turns back to Sarraounia to show a directly contrasting atmosphere. We see a wide-angle long-range picture of Sarraounia leading her people to a new place to settle, moving among lush vegetation; obviously part of their natural environment. We see them entering a dense forest marching to the tune of the griot, praising his queen. Hondo presents Sarraounia as an icon of social harmony, of public consensus and support for the queen.[5]

Sarraounia won the FESPACO Pan African Film Award in 1988 and the reviews were mostly favourable:

> [*Sarraounia*] est unique dans le discourse formulé sur les lutes anti-coloniales, car il restitue, mais surtout residue [...] une des défaites les plues cuisantes de l'armée francaise en Afrique noire (Tcheuyap 2003, 13).

Mboye Cham holds that

> Med Hondo follows these events of African and French colonial history to produce a counter narrative which, in its scope, style, structure, tone and language accomplishes the compound task of recovery, re-telling and re-interpretation in a manner that makes the past speak about [...] a renovated sense of life and humanity (Mboye Cham 2004, 20).

Med Hondo himself assesses his aims and achievements in the film as follows:

> Sarraounia was made so that people could reflect upon the present, based on the past. If you don't know the past, you cannot adequately measure the present, much less prepare for the future (Pfaff 1997, 157).

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[5] The Franco-German TV channel ARTE showed a documentary: *Capitaines de ténèbres*, dir. Serge Moati, script Yves Laurent, first broadcast April 28, 2006.

On the Western shores of the Black Atlantic, African Maroons (freed or run-away slaves) had established their self-administrated and largely independent settlements, the Quilombos, first in the coastal areas of Recife and Pernambuco. The largest and most important Quilombo, *Palmares*, was founded around 1650 in the more secluded mountains and forests of the Serra de Barriga in Alagoas State. Palmares was populated by freed and run-away African slaves, Indians, poor whites and Sephardic Jews who had fled the persecution by the catholic inquisition in Portugal or Madeira. The Portuguese colonial authorities kept attacking the Quilombos in their attempt to gain total control over the entire territory of Brazil. Palmares alone counted more than twenty military attacks during the period between 1654 and 1678. The Portuguese commander Domingos Jorges Velho finally succeeded in capturing Palmares after he had transported heavy artillery into the deep forests surrounding Palmares. He destroyed the town and whoever was taken prisoner was sold back into slavery. A large percentage of the Palmarinos managed to escape, among them the spiritual and military leader Zumbi, who was later betrayed, arrested and executed on 20 November 1695. The anniversary of Zumbi's death remains to this day the memorial day of Black Consciousness in Brazil.

Although the principle situation differs considerably from that in the West African Sahel in the late 19th century, the Quilombos faced the same problems as the West African independent kingdoms. Since the official records were written and controlled by the colonial authorities, they therefore represented a biased and distorted perspective of historical events. The victims of the aggression against the Quilombos created their own oral narratives, but they remained largely unnoticed outside the Afro-Brazilian community until the 1980s, when critical research in Afro-Brazilian culture flourished.

Carlos Diegues, one of the leading figures in the "novo Cinema" movement in Brazil, became involved in Quilombo resistance movements at an early stage and released his first feature film on that topic, *Ganga Zumba* in 1964, which he followed with *Xica da Silva* (1977). In 1986 Diegues presented the feature film *Quilombo*, which is informed mostly by new research on Palmares by Decio Freitas (Decio Freitas 1974).

Carlos Diegues was very much aware of the ambiguities of his project, wavering between historical truth (whose truth and whose history?) and legendary narratives, the oral traditions that were kept alive among the Afro-Brazilian population. Carlos Diegues, having grown up in the Alagoas area, recalls listening to the old stories (mostly told by women). Diegues decided that he did not want to shoot a "research paper film". He was "much more interested in the myth, the legend, than the details of history" (Coco Fusco 1986, 12-14). For *Ganga Zumba*, Diegues gained much information and inspiration from the novel *Ganga Zumba* by Jo o Felicio dos Santos (1963).[6] Carlos Diegues confirms that he gave priority to the legendary version of the narrative, perhaps caused by the Latin American infatuation with Magic Realism (Johnson, Stam 1995, 424-426).

> [Working together with historians] I wrote my script, then I set aside the history and the story, and put together the legend and history (Coco Fusco 1986, 14).[7]

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[6] Dos Santos was also Carlos Diegues' co-author for the film script of *Ganga Zumba*, and an actor in both *Ganga Zumba* and *Quilombo.*

[7] Robert Stam (1982-1983) speaks about the "historic and legendary inspiration of *Ganga Zumba*".

Particularly when speaking about the origins of the Quilombos, Carlos Diegues resorts to a mythical-spiritual explanation:

> There are no documents about the origins of the Quilombos…but I don't believe what the Portuguese wrote. So I imagined that it all began with the Great Mother, the old mother, almost like a goddess – Acotirene. I chose the mother as the beginning of everything – the most unconscious idea of the birth of everything (Coco Fusco 1986, 14).

In contrast to Med Hondo/Abdoulaye Mamani's *Sarraounia*, which plays with the concept of magic and sorcery, but emphasises rationality, Carlos Diegues obviously prefers an approach that concentrates more on the spirituality, and on the mythical and religious aspects of life among the Palmarinos.

Quilombo also concentrates on the three formative phases in life from childhood/ adolescence (Zumbi's youth) through maturity (Ganga Zumba's reign) to the height of tragedy (Fall of Palmares and Death of Zumbi).

Zumbi was born en route to Palmares, captured by the Portuguese during one of the earliest attacks on Palmares and brought to a mission station where he was educated for the priesthood. At the same time, Acotirene, a spirit medium of the sea goddess, directed the Quilombo in the Pernambuco coastal area, and later also in Palmares. Here, Carlos Diegues started to create a contrastive set of images for the Portuguese and the Maroons. We see Zumbi locked up in his monastery, with poorly lit vaults, high ceilings, and a sinister almost oppressive atmosphere. The camera looks down on Zumbi, bent down praying, in a submissive posture. He does not seem to have any conception of his own identity and certainly not of his identity as a born *Palmarino*. Threatening omens emerge: a tropical storm with lightning that sets the monastery on fire threatening Zumbi's life, then Halley's Comet appears and Zumbi decides to forsake the Christian priesthood. He escapes and makes his way to Palmares where he embarks on a career of another type of priesthood: the Camboulaye priesthood of the Afro-Brazilians. In contrast to the claustrophobic images of Zumbi's seminary days, Acotirene lives in a wide cave directly on the coast of the Atlantic. In addition to her, the camera captures views of the infinite space of the sea. From the depths of the cave, we see Acotirene sitting in the entrance of the cave, (a deep focus take) contemplating the sea as the connecting element to the old home in Africa. The Christian church evokes an oppressive atmosphere, while the (Afro-)Brazilian religious perspective appears to open out the view onto infinity and unlimited freedom. The different types of images breathe a spirit of intimidation or inspiration and liberation. The meaning of the images evolves mostly through association and contextualisation—the ambience within which the (African or Portuguese) character is embedded.

The middle of the Quilombo story centres around the figure of Ganga Zumba who made Palmares a self-reliant but prosperous community. The threat of Portuguese aggression, however, is always present. Ganga Zumba agrees to a contract with the Portuguese. He is to remove his people to the Cacau Valley (which can be more easily controlled by the Portuguese) in return for the promise of guaranteed safety and non-aggression.[8] The

[8] Ganga Zumba was the compromising diplomatic leader, while his successor in Palmares, Zumbi, acts as the hardliner who refuses to negotiate with the Portuguese.

contrastive images focus again on the way in which the characters are accommodated within their natural environment. Cacau Valley lies in the middle of the sugar cane plantations and there are increasingly frequent provocations from the plantation owners. We see, on the one hand, the slaves and the colonial soldiers marching along the paths between the sugar cane. On the other hand, the Maroons move clandestinely through the cane fields, using the plantation as cover.

The real confrontation occurs in the final phase when Domingo Jorge Velho decides to destroy Palmares using superior military force including heavy artillery. Again, Diegues resorts to a Manichean imagology: the Portuguese intruders come as violators of the natural environment, while the Palmarinos seem to forge an alliance with the forest. We see the marching columns forcing their way through the forest, when suddenly the guerrilla fighters from Palmares drop in ambush from the trees in which they had been hiding, landing in the middle of the soldiers and causing total confusion. This is partly because they wear masks to look threatening.

In the end, Velho shells the mud-and-stick walls of Palmares to pieces and destroys the town. Zumbi is only caught later. His final moment before being captured and killed is loaded with spiritual connotations. Fatally wounded, he throws his spear (a gift from Yoruba god Ogun) into the air because it must not fall into the hands of the aggressors. We see the spear flying far up into the sky and disappearing into infinite space. Carlos Diegues comments on this image as follows:

> At the moment when he throws the spear into the sky, he [Zumbi] chooses legend. And when he chooses legend we choose tragedy. He becomes a myth, he prefers to die as a myth rather than become a slave again (Coco Fusco1986, 14).

Film makers obviously conceive the key images they use to direct, or perhaps manipulate the emotions of the spectators, in a simplifying and stereotyping fashion. Since both films, *Sarraounia* and *Quilombo*, deal with aggression and (dis-)possession, the contrast is embedded in the concept of intrusion or (colonial) penetration, and the concept of conservation and protection on the side of the "indigenes". Grabbing the soil in *Sarraounia* and penetrating the forest in *Quilombo* imply alienation from the original and rightful owners and the dispossession of the community of the inhabitants. The images of the aggressors therefore have to convey the concept of distance and of alienation. The images further the good/bad, the negative/positive reactions of the viewer.

Carlos Diegues, in the words of Robert Stam,

> aims at a poetic synthesis rather than naturalistic reproduction, striving to construct what he himself called a historical hypothesis, anthropologically plausible but above all, poetically correct (1986, 43).

The challenge was to convey the historical grandeur of Palmares while retaining a sense of magic and hyperreality. Med Hondo underlined the importance of his historical vision with an understanding of the present—i.e. topical political relevance. Similarly Carlos Diegues refers to the utopian promise inherent in *Quilombo*. "The film celebrates the first multi-ethnic and egalitarian society in the Americas. It treats a political dream which existed at a certain time (and seems to linger on), it represents Brazil at its best, its most cordial and

democratic" (Stam 1986, 44). Quilombo was produced during the worst military dictatorship in Brazil and it created the desire to build a new utopia, preferably within the near future (Coco Fusco 1986, 14).

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