

## **The Sole of Africa: Shoes in Three African Films**

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### **Introduction**

Focusing on footwear in African films affords the possibility of understanding more about film and material culture and about the representation of agency, power and politics in post-Independence African cultural production. This chapter will begin by exploring the major critical approaches to clothing practices in Africa, outlining how these approaches underplay the specific ontological status of footwear. The chapter then examines how the anti-colonial writings of Bernard Dadié (1916 – 2019) and Frantz Fanon (1925 – 1961) mobilise the ontological status of footwear for resistant purposes, arguing that these works set up representational paradigms grounding the debates with which post-Independence African filmmaking dialogues. The discussion then explores the depiction of footwear and bare-footedness in two African films from the immediate post-Independence era and one from the 1990s, tracing how these films engage the critical reach of images of footwear as oppression and agency.

Until the late twentieth century, academic research on African garment practices was grounded in colonial epistemologies that measured, described and naturalised hierarchised notions of difference. In the postcolonial era historical cultural studies has increasingly dialogued with ethnography and scholarship has turned to explore clothing as material culture, examining its practical uses and symbolic representations, its role in meaning-making, and the body's surface as a uniquely important site in the construction of social identities (Hay, 1996; Küchler and Miller, 2005; Kisiang'ani, 2011). This focus on clothing practice as meaning-making at the body's surface has allowed the exploration of 'one of the

frontiers upon which individual and social identities are simultaneously created' (Hendrickson 1996: 2), and 'the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialisation is enacted' (Turner 1980: 12). However, these approaches are problematic for their promulgation of the Eurocentric belief that there is an '*inevitable* presence of the body in various discrete moments in diverse African cultures' (Burke 1996: 191). This is because assuming 'the salience of the body as a subject in all societies' in contexts where Western colonisation invented that body as an imagined subject and then defined, controlled and 'improved' it (Burke 1996: 191) hides the reality that clothing in Africa is involved on specifically African terms in issues of power, identity, and representation.

It should not need asserting that clothing in African societies has always signified in complex ways. For centuries before the arrival of colonial invaders, African dress 'was little associated with utilitarian needs [...] Rather, clothing and personal ornamentation conveyed identity, status, values and the significance of the occasion' (Martin 1995: 155), constituting 'à la fois un fait de communications et un objet social' [simultaneously a form of communication and a social object] (Ngong 2012: 88-9). Contestations of the way that African bodies were clothed and presented 'were a crucial site in the [...] dialectic of means and ends that shaped the encounter between Europeans and Africans' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 222). In the post-Independence era, 'dress and fashion have been centrally implicated in the forging of a distinct African modernity' (Allman 2004: 5); and in the contemporary period, clothing exercises power through networks of meaning that interconnect pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial significations. This is particularly the case where protocols of power performed through dress solidified customs performing power and domination. By transferring expressions of power that were central in the preceding colonial era to transactions between coloniser and colonised, dress in postcolonial Africa became 'one of the covert sources of violence and an unforeseen locus of power-play in the

postcolony [... ;] clothing in postcolonial Africa can be analysed through the lens of domination [... ;] clothing can be the instrument of command, threat, and even intimidation' (Ngong 2012: 89)<sup>1</sup>. Postcolonial African elites have bought titles and associated forms of dress denoting social status based on moral capital, using wealth rather than socially positive activity to gain these forms of dress. This hijacking of forms of dress previously accessible only to those whose acts instanced the required moral values replaces social value with monetary value. This has led in the postcolony to a situation where traditional garments no longer reliably denote the moral values with which they were associated. Instead, such garments are acquired and worn precisely because at each moment when they perform the former moral value they also visibly perform the ability of power and wealth to buy out these values (Tcheuyap 1999: 7; Mbemebe 2001: 131-2). Thus where changes can be identified between colonial and pre-colonial, and pre-colonial and post-colonial clothing practices in African contexts, these should not be approached as the purely functional versus the purely symbolic, or the purely traditional versus the purely 'modern' (i.e. Western). Clothing practices in Africa are far better understood as active fashioning that has always engaged individuals and groups dynamically with meaning-making, time, place and power.

### **Footwear: ontology and postcolonial critique**

Within the longstanding scholarship on clothing practices in Africa little attention has been given to the specificities of footwear. Phyllis Martin's fascinating study of the challenges to colonial power expressed through a 1936 disagreement between African football players and Brazzaville authorities over 'native' players wearing boots (Martin 1995: 1-2; 99-125) makes a strong step in this direction. Nonetheless Martin reads the disagreement as part of the wider ways in which clothing has been a contested social symbol in African

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<sup>1</sup> Une des sources non-ostensibles de violence et lieu imprévu des enjeux de pouvoir en postcolonie [...] le vêtement en Afrique post-coloniale peut s'analyser dans une perspective de domination [...] le vêtement peut se faire outil d'injonction, de menace, voire même d'intimidation.

contexts; she does not emphasise anything *sui generis* about footwear in the debate. Yet while footwear's status clearly does intersect with that of all clothing as part of the flows of power mediated through the symbolic realm, treating footwear as merely the same as all other garments ignores the ways in which footwear constitutes, ontologically and phenomenologically, a category apart. Margot DeMello notes that 'feet, and [...] shoes [...], operate in the liminal spaces between the body and the physical space that surrounds it. Feet connect us to the world and allow us to move through the world' (2009: xx). Footwear disrupts some tenets of the epistemological category of 'body coverings' while yet emphasising others; footwear is a protective covering and a tool for effective movement, but it is much more besides, constituting a threshold object that mediates the subject, its contexts and its perception of those contexts. The human's upright stance places the foot at the forefront of the production of knowledge and culture and enables locomotion and encounter. Footwear's enabling of the upright stance contributes to liberating the human hand to make and create, the prerequisite of the crafting of complex group cultures. Further, footwear is unique amongst garments because it is the one item of clothing that, in the process of mediating the outside world, moulds itself to the wearer's body's individual contours. Footwear is created only by humans, and it expresses certain inherent features of being human. Through its complex relations with the human body and the contextual grounds of human life, footwear is ontologically separate from other categories of garment. For these reasons the shoe has resonated as more than merely an item of clothing in human culture, from American folk shoe-trees, to mediaeval European practices of walling up shoes to ward off evil, to faith injunctions about the shoes of the dead or the unholy uncleanness of footwear (DeMello 2009: 33-38). And in a further parallel, footwear can be read to act as a synecdoche for all cultural products in its mediation between the tangible world, the human body, and human perception: shoes can be concrete, literal, merely utilitarian; but they can

also be fantastically embellished art objects, culturally high or low end, commercial or artistic. Footwear may be individual, artisanal and geographically specific, but it may also be mass, generic and ubiquitous. Footwear therefore, provides a privileged perspective for exploring how material culture mediates power and agency in colonial, postcolonial and globalised contexts.

Given the complexity of the mediations that footwear as material culture affords, it is not surprising that the shoe emerges as an important motif in a range of cultural works that critique racialised encounters. With its evident play of visibility and occlusion, and its intimate ontological connection with the state of being human, the shoe provides the perfect motif to critique historical reality and its symbolic expression in culture and representation. Footwear is powerfully resonant in cultural products grounded in contexts of racialised oppression, subjugation and marginalisation, where the denial of footwear is mobilised to express the denial of humanity (Angelou 1986; Butake 1993; Treviño 1999; Gutberlet and Snyman 2012). That this deployment of images of footwear to resist oppression is no coincidence is particularly well illustrated by two influential anti-colonial narratives, Bernard Dadié's novel *Un nègre à Paris/An African in Paris* (1959) and Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre/The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

In Dadié's novel the first-person narrator expresses multiple anxieties over temporal, geographical and personal boundaries, and the unease of inhabiting, on the Dakar-Paris flight, an in-between space where such boundaries dissolve (Dadié 1959: 21-22). The culmination of these anxieties focuses on footwear: the narrator realises that having removed his shoes earlier in the flight, he cannot find them; and once he does, his feet are so swollen he cannot get the shoes on again, his colonised body rendered monstrously excessive by the airborne dissolution of the boundaries that had defined it on the ground. Horrified by the idea of landing barefoot in Paris, he battles against the shoes with a pencil remodelled as a shoehorn,

that snaps in the struggle (Dadié 1959: 21-3). This episode of bathos is also an important episode of ironic connection hinting at the barriers, customs and perceptions that make even a highly educated African man anxious when faced with the barefoot state. The internalised Western correlation of barefootedness with uncivilised status is shown to have a psycho-affective power (Coulthard 2014: 26) so strong that even his status as highly educated cannot allay the fear of performing the West's Primitive.

As such, Dadié's narrator's acute concerns projected onto footwear bear the all hallmarks of Du Boisian double consciousness: the footwear is so crucial because it constitutes a material sign located at the body's surface that can either mask or reveal the colonisers' phantasmagoric *nègre*. For whilst appropriate apparel worn in suitable ways can disguise or attenuate colonial constructions of blackness, the inappropriate deployment of clothing serves instead to compound and intensify otherness and stereotyping. Clothing acts as a proxy for the colonised body by its closeness to it. This can render individual items anomalous even when worn normatively. But clothing also acts as an extension of the colonised body when not worn normatively, such that garments and the black body can, in racialised contexts, become othered by white norms even when, as discrete items, they objectively inhabit those norms. Thus clothing can render difference both visible and invisible; it can both accentuate and mask black skin in white territory. So Dadié's narrator possess shoes, but they are mislaid, or ill-fitting, or impossible to put on. His footwear may bridge the geographical and personal boundaries of colonial space, allowing him as an African to 'pass' with sufficient legitimacy to cross; but the footwear is also the source of paralysing anxiety, a tenuous disguise that may at any moment fall away and 'out' the African as colonialism's Primitive.

Dadié's narrator rehearses in microcosm the psychological complexes of domination that are central to Fanon's analyses of the structures of colony and postcolony in Africa. In

*Les Damnés de la terre/The Wretched of the Earth* (1961/1963), the barefoot state in Fanon's text communicates a strength of feeling far from the state of comic dissonance that Dadié evokes through mockery of the anxieties of both the colonised and the coloniser. Here, shoes are present as an arresting motif that indexes oppression by the colonial settlers:

The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones [...] The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.

(Fanon trans. Farrington 1963: 38)<sup>2</sup>

This polemical image of the colonisers' feet hidden in needlessly sturdy shoes is a powerful synecdoche that contrasts the 'bare life' existence imposed on the colonised with the 'sovereign' existence of the settler (Agamben 1998). The barefoot colonised of Fanon's description is the abject product of a regime which has enforced dehumanising deprivations that simultaneously create and confirm the essentialised status of the colonised as Other. Fanon's oppressor's shoes represent the historical reality of the imposed economic indigence of *les damnés de la terre* and the economic sufficiency of their oppressors; and their use as textual motif also shows how expressing this oppression in the symbolic realm through footwear draws attention to the reliance of power on a dialectic of visibility and invisibility.

Dadié and Fanon textualise footwear as a socially charged material object, using images of shoes to explore the colonial Manicheism that pits barefoot savagery against shod civilisation. These images of footwear articulate topoi of oppression, agency and

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<sup>2</sup> Les pieds du colon ne sont jamais aperçus, sauf peut-être dans la mer, mais on n'est jamais assez proche d'eux. Des pieds protégés par des chaussures solides alors que les rues dans leur ville sont nettes, lisses, sans trous, sans cailloux [...] La ville du colonisé est une ville affamée, affamée de pain, de viande, de chaussures, de charbon, de lumière. La ville du colonisé est une ville accroupie, une ville à genoux, une ville vautrée. (Fanon 1961 : 42).

resistance central to the discursive background of the immediate post-Independence period as well as the later period of neo-imperial globalisation, the periods from which the three films studied here derive. Film, as a visual medium, is particularly able to explore this dynamic tension between agency and oppression. In the next section, I will explore how *Borom Sarret*, *La Noire de...* and *Hyènes* achieve this through an exploration of the resistant charge of footwear via the films' visual and narrative motifs.

### **Footwear on Film in Africa**

#### *Borom Sarret* (1963)

Ousmane Sembene was the pioneering figure of African-directed cinema in Africa, and in his early films *Borom Sarret* (1963) and *La Noire de...* (1966), a range of images of footwear is used to examine the visibility and invisibility of power, opposing shod and barefoot states, 'high' and 'low' shoe types (heeled shoes or boots versus sandals and flip-flops), and closed versus open footwear (the enclosed shoe or boot versus the open sandal). Thus, from the very beginning of filmmaking by Africans in Africa, footwear occurs on screen with strategic intentionality.

*Borom Sarret* (1963) screens a day in the life of an indigent carter, a *borom sarret*. The carter's livelihood depends on his being mobile in the postcolonial city. The film shows this mobility as a diegetic reality for the protagonist; however, it also acts as a metaphor for social mobility and power, with barriers to mobility connected visually to poverty and powerlessness. The carter is already a transportation anachronism (Şaul 2018; Green-Simms 2017: Chapter 3), and the film charts his difficult day in Dakar as it worsens. The linear, chronological narrative of the film shows the carter providing transport for helpless, tragic or unscrupulous clients, and making, or failing to make, the right decisions in the context of postcolonial urban modernity. In the film's dénouement, *Borom Sarret* agrees to take a client



to area of the city from which lowly carters are banned. His cart is confiscated by the police, his war medal too, and he returns home without the means to make a living. The final sequences show his wife leaving to search for work.

From the outset, the film installs visual tropes of movement as a human necessity. As the opening credits roll up, fixed-camera images of humans travelling along Dakar highways show motor vehicles, pedestrians and bicycles passing through the field of vision, before the film focuses down onto the carter's day, itself inherently responsive to the movements of others. Within this framework, two scenes further into the film are crucial for their visually striking and diegetically significant emphasis on footwear. In the first scene of interest, Borom Sarret is shown napping in his cart during a pause in work. The camera takes up a striking first-person narrative viewpoint, showing the carter's legs extended and his sandalled feet projecting over the side of the cart. Heard before he is seen, a disabled beggar, barefoot and with no function in his legs, drags himself along the street on his hands and knees, asking for alms. Sharp cuts change the camera angle to frame the beggar's movement from behind and place his dragging bare feet centrally in view. Borom Sarret lies across his cart and the beggar approaches perpendicularly so that the two bodies, one still and shod, the other barefoot and in movement, are in marked visual contrast. Borom Sarret ignores the beggar, commenting in voiceover that there are so many of them, there is nothing to be done and so better not to give money at all. Diegetically the episode is one of realism, emphasising the harsh realities for postcolonial Dakar's poor in the immediate post-Independence years. Visually however, a different dynamic is at work, with footwear signalling a hierarchy of the dispossessed: the carter's sandals physically occupy a space above the barefoot beggar, illustrating the city's socio-economic stratification through clear spatial relations. The flip-flop sandal, the coloniser's idea of primitive footwear, is contrasted in this episode against the barefoot state of 'bare humanity' to symbolise Borom Sarret's relative economic

superiority, while the striking framing of feet and footwear in filmed space provides a visual illustration of this hierarchy.

The second episode of interest forms a corollary to this first scene in its use of a first-person viewpoint and visual rehearsal of spatial power relations mediated through contrasting images of footwear. Borom Sarret has travelled with an insistent customer to the off-limits 'Plateau' ['The Heights'], the district's name itself implying a vertical spatial relationship between different socio-economic groups. Here Borom Sarret encounters the forces that control movement in the city, in the person of a policeman who stops them. The smartly dressed customer and Borom Sarret descend from the cart to the ground, but while the customer quickly moves away into a waiting car, Borom Sarret is held up and required to account for his presence in the district. At the point of highest tension between the helpless carter and state authority personified by the policeman, the camera adopts a first-person narrative angle to show the encounter from the carter's point of view. The viewer looks down with Borom Sarret at his war medal crushed under the boot of authority; and looks up with him at the towering policeman making notes to impound the cart. At the very moment where state authority deprives Borom Sarret of his mobility and livelihood, the earlier spatial relationship between Borom Sarret and the beggar is recreated in the shot composition as well as the narrative of impassivity and resignation, this time with Borom Sarret on the lowest social and economic rung. In both these scenes the camera angles place the viewer as an observer of the events, and also as a participant in domination, for the viewer is structured along with the carter to dominate the beggar but to be dominated by the forces of state authority.

These episodes draw a contrast between abject barefootedness and sandal-wearing, and between sandals and the boots of authority. This contrast exemplifies how forms of clothing mediate power transfers between the colonial and postcolonial orders in Africa, as

identified by critics such as Mbembe, Ngong, Tcheuyap and Martin. In *Borrom Sarret*, colonial commandment is depicted continuing seamlessly within the new postcolonial society. The carter's fatalistic acceptance of the hierarchy that places him well above the beggar is portrayed as a complicity with this continuity, for ultimately it is his acceptance of this status quo of power that leads to the film's dénouement, from which stasis and increased indigence result. If in the postcolony, as *Borrom Sarret* illustrates, 'the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology [...] the practices of those who command and those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render both powerless' (Mbembe 2001: 133), for the viewer nonetheless, the unusual images of footwear that are foregrounded force an awareness of the postcolony's structural power relations through their revelation of the hidden continuities of power; and through their presentation of power's invisible naturalisation of social hierarchies as starkly unnatural.

*La Noire de.../Black Girl... (1966)*

*La Noire de...* (1966) was Sembene's second film. An adaptation of his short story of the same name published in *Presence Africaine* in 1961, it charts the story of Diouana who takes up work as a children's maid for a French family in post-Independence Dakar, and who is enticed to move to France to work for the family on the meretricious promise of a better life in *la belle France*. The film emphasises the tensions between legacies of colonialism, post-Independence African nationalism and burgeoning consumer society. The recurring motif of Diouana's shoes and feet crystallises issues of power and race that are central narrative and aesthetic features of the film; and its 'vocal cinema' (Wang 2017) uses voice-over to express Diouana's contestatory thoughts, censored from open expression by the power relations depicted in the narrative. Diouana's narrative viewpoint is also given

prominence visually. There are avoidances of shot/reverse-shot conventions for dialogue that highlight the maid's lack of genuine right of reply: an early tracking shot is clearly situated on Diouana's passenger side of the car on the drive from Marseille to Antibes, but she says very little; the view out from the Antibes apartment high-rise window replicates Diouana's worldview, with oppressive, anonymous darkness across the Riviera filling the screen in evident pathetic fallacy. The *mise en scène* alternates this emphasis on the perspective of the oppressed maid with shots staging the characters' relationships from a third-person point of view. Crucially, however, the third person point-of-view does not coincide with that of the white *colons*; instead, their complexes of superiority and paternalism are acutely exposed through the alternate foregrounding of Diouana's viewpoint and white colonial privilege viewed from the outside.

Within this *mise en scène*, *La Noire de...* dramatises clothing as a highly charged object of desire that can both oppress and contest. At one point on a quiet street of the Plateau, Diouana admires two well-dressed African women passing in their stylish clothes and heels; and during their leisure time in Dakar, Diouana and her politically-aware student boyfriend (he is pictured in his room against the backdrop of fabric bearing the Swahili word *Uhuru* [freedom], celebrating Lumumba and Congo Independence,) pore over a French magazine's fashion spread, absorbing the lifestyle promises implicit in it. In France, Diouana speculates that the reward for a lunch well-cooked for guests will be a shopping trip for stylish clothes, only to realise later in the film that she has been deceived: Madame's gifts of cast-off clothes, like so much else, were nothing more than a lure. Most of all, there is ongoing conflict between Madame's expectations of appropriate dress for a maid, and Diouana's expectations of dress for an immigrant worker who has made it to France.

Madame employs several domestic staff in her large Dakar residence, where Diouana's role is restricted to looking after the children. In contrast, in Antibes Madame is

reduced to one all-purpose maid in a small apartment, a significant drop in status. Diouana's comment that 'Madam wasn't like that in Dakar, nor was Sir', beyond commenting on their harsher behaviour towards her now in France, invites this more general interpretation of their straightened circumstances. Diouana's importance for Madame therefore lies as much in confirming Madame's non-labouring 'overclass' status, a status threatened by decolonisation and the return to France (Curran 2003: 123; Oscherwitz 2014: 57), as it does in the actual domestic labour that Diouana provides. In the French apartment, Diouana insistently dresses in Western dresses and heels, jewellery and smart wigs for her domestic work. Diouana's pride in and care over her appearance belies the demeaning work that she is doing, and marks her agency and aspirations. Confronted with this disruptive mimicry (Bhabha 1994: 86), Madame harangues Diouana for how unsuitably smartly she is dressed, disciplining the maid's body symbolically as she fastens her into an apron. These initial arguments about clothing in the film nuance the drama of racial oppression through a gendered presentation of the power struggle depicted, providing the context for the film's rehearsal of a gendered dialectical relationship between shod and barefoot states.

Diouana's footwear is the first aspect of her that the viewer perceives, the clack of her high heels against the hard floor of the Nice port terminal heard before either she is seen or any of her thoughts communicated on voice-over. High heels are thus indexical of Diouana's presence even in her absence. Moreover, this sound of high heels follows immediately on from the prophetically mournful warning horn blasts of the docking *Ancerville* that punctuate the opening credits. Through the soundscape alone in the first few minutes of the film therefore, an African's arrival in France is predicated as isolation and danger but counterposed with quickening hope for the future; Diouana's high heels enter the frame as over-determined objects channelling this tension. Her footwear is later at the centre of two specific scenes of conflict in the film.

The first of these occurs between Diouana and her mistress, and is an intensification of Madame's frustration with Diouana's stylish dressing. On a day when Diouana has slept in and taken her time in the bathroom and dressing, Madame must prepare breakfast and clear away. As Diouana prepares to start the day's work, the camera lingers on her changing out of sandals into her high-heeled shoes, with a close focus on her feet crossing the bedroom floor to the living room in these shoes. Immediately Diouana reaches the living room, Madame orders her to take off these heels. In an act of mute rebellion, Diouana takes them off but leaves them in the middle of the floor and goes barefoot into the kitchen. Madame is obliged to stoop down to pick the shoes up and carry them to Diouana, extending the role reversal between maid and mistress. The camera pauses on a shot of Diouana's bare feet pressed against each other under the kitchen table, and then on the heeled shoes thrown down next to her feet by Madame. Madame tells Diouana that if she does not work, she will not be fed. Diouana pushes her breakfast away and her voice-over informs that audience that if she is not fed, she will not work. Her passive resistance to colonial oppression through bodily non-compliance begins fully at this point, focalised through this dispute over footwear.

The second episode in which shoes figure prominently is presented in flashback as Diouana dozes in her room. The episode is triggered by the preceding argument over footwear that generates Diouana's resistance to Madame's orders. In the flashback, Diouana is walking with her new boyfriend on, significantly, Dakar's *Place de L'Indépendance*. She tells him that she is going to work in France for her employer, noting that he disapproves of her job and deriving satisfaction from having irritated him in this way. Taking off her heels, she skips barefoot along the war memorial commemorating the sacrifice of Senegalese soldiers in the Second World War, chanting 'I'm going to France, I'm going to France'. Her boyfriend is outraged by this disrespectful behaviour, and at this point there is a telling break in the realist diegesis of the film with intercut documentary footage of Senegalese dignitaries

in European suits laying wreaths at the inauguration of the monument. This footage signals the contested narrative of the contribution of colonial troops to the Allies' triumph in World War II, for while this monument honours the war dead, it does so by borrowing from the memorial discourse and architecture of the colonial power, and it does not hint at any memory of the colonial drafting, exploitation and post-war discrimination against African soldiers who fought for the French. It is telling that this documentary sequence breaking the realist diegesis is presented as springing from the boyfriend's thoughts; Diouana, caught up in her fantasies of *la belle France*, is oblivious to the monument's seriousness, while her boyfriend tries to defend the monument's values against her frivolity, shouting at her that she is committing sacrilege. Diouana is screened here crossing gendered and racial boundaries that others, in this case a masculine, nationalist other, police for her.

The scene depicts Diouana willingly choosing the barefoot state as an expression of her freedom from expectation and constraint, contrasting the past with her present of being ordered to go barefoot in the French household to emphasise her lowly status. Diouana's barefootedness in Dakar does not imply performance of the West's Primitive, but instead parallels aspects of 'sapeur' practice (Thomas 2003: 956; 958-9) by adopting of forms of dress and self-fashioning that disrupt the etiquettes of the postcolonial *cadres*, challenging the ways in which postcolonial power magnified colonial power by re-inscribing colonial-era clothing norms as dominant in the new nation (Mbembe 2001: 131-2). Diouana's modernity thus relegates her to an in-between space: she challenges the political consciousness of the postcolony through her rejection of masculine nationalist solemnities in favour of feminine consumer culture, but her embrace of consumer culture places her in opposition to the colonial complexes of white superiority in which such culture was embedded (Curran 2003: 123), because she refuses to accept the white disciplining of her body and the suppression of her subjectivity by white discourse. Diouana's double marginalisation from both white power

and masculinist, nationalist postcolonial power demonstrates the extent to which such power is neither race- nor gender-neutral, and it is tropes of footwear and barefootedness that rehearse this in detail in the film.

To sum up, motifs of footwear in Sembene's early films comment on transfers of power between colony and postcolony, and on the desire to, and challenge of, contesting both new and established orders of power when these past and present formations are inherently entangled. In both *Borom Sarret* and *La Noire de...* film tropes of footwear and the barefoot state rehearse how, in the aftermath of African independence, the challenges of decolonisation compel individuals to re-fashion both appearance and mentality, chiming with Gayatri Spivak's insight that decolonisation 'involves a re-fashioning of the structures that we inherit from colonial days' and a 'change of mind' (Yegenoglu and Mutman 2001-2: 10).

### *Hyènes/Hyenas* (1992)

Three decades later, in the 'sober era of globalised capital with pockets completely emptied by corrupt black leaders and debts to Western banks' (Mudede 2015: 4), Djibril Diop Mambéty's film *Hyènes* highlights the dialectic of barefootedness to footwear, and hierarchies in types of footwear, as part of its exploration of power and moral responsibility. *Hyènes/Hyenas* adapts Dürrenmatt's play *Der Besuch der Alten Dame/The Visit* (1956) from its post-War European context to Africa in the wake of late 20<sup>th</sup> century IMF structural adjustment programmes. Through repetition that is nonetheless a highly original re-writing of the Swiss play (Gabor-Pierce 2011:195), the film forms a recursive sequence with it and plays satirically with time-bound dichotomies between the original and the fake, and the essential and the contingent.

In the dilapidated Dakar arrondissement of Colobane news spreads of the return to town of an elderly lady 'richer than the World Bank'. Linguere Ramatou had left the town



decades earlier, a disgraced teenager pregnant with the child of Draman Drameh. The latter refused to accept paternity, and rather than marry her, bribed two others to swear in court that they had slept with her. Ramatou now promises billions in riches to the Colobane townsfolk in return for justice: Draman Drameh must die and the townsfolk must make this happen. Gradually the power of money to undermine the townsfolk's loyal stance towards their well-liked prominent elder citizen Draman makes itself felt. While Draman comes to accept that justice must be done for his past behaviour, the townsfolk who conspire to achieve his death are left with no moral superiority; the final images of the film symbolise this through bulldozers, waste ground and high-rise flats where the town once was.

In spite of the increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere of *Hyènes*' narrative action, images of movement abound in the film, as they did also in *Borom Sarret* and *La Noire de...* In *Hyènes* however, human movement is limited from the outset. The train timetable is implacable, the rickety check-point barrier on the dusty town road impedes progress, and shimmering expanse of the Atlantic Ocean is set against a concrete bunker; for all of the characters except Ramatou, mobility is trammelled by power's organisation of time and space through poverty (poor townsfolk can only travel as far as their feet can carry them) and power (trains cannot be made to stop at Colobane since there is no timetable for this as there is no station there; the town cannot be entered or left without its only road's barrier being raised by the sentinel). Only Ramatou's billions can re-order time and space: for she alone is able to buy train-stopping rights, the judicial process, religion's spiritual underpinning of temporal morality, and to 'abolish time' through Draman's death; while her riches allow the previously static, barefoot townspeople to whirl through the air in the funfair and escape from Colobane in their new 2CV cars.

Yet the film does not equate the mobility achieved to freedom, and the extra-diegetic footage of animals cut into the narrative underscores this. First elephants, then vultures,

hyenas, and an owl wander, prowl, fly and observe, their freedom highlighting the circumscription of freedom taking place diegetically as Ramatou's billions wreak moral havoc. Where once the townsfolk's choice was limited by poverty, now it is limited by the promise of incoming wealth. In *Hyènes* the power of money is so great as to be totalitarian: there is no choice possible except the one that money dictates, and no life possible outside the command of money.

Mambéty's conception of cinema as tracing imaginative worlds that can present the measure of human possibilities both aesthetically and in the realms of action aligns with Dürrenmatt's theatrical *mise-en-scène* where physical objects render visible the limits of the characters' agency via non-verbal connections and conceptions (Diller 1966:198). In *Hyènes* it is clothing that is especially resonant with symbolic meaning (Ukadike 2002: 124-127): wealth's corrupting power is made visible as a contagion spreading throughout Colobane, the sickness manifesting visibly and bodily in clothing. With Ramatou's descent from the train dressed in a golden dress, boots and shawl, a vision intensified by her gold prosthetic arm and leg, a plague of golden items seeps into the town. From the police-chief's new gold tooth, to the Mayor's increasingly wild West garb (Oscherwitz 2008: 231), to Draman Drameh's wife's wholly gold outfit at the mass auction of white goods, down to the poor townsfolk's newly acquired gold neck-scarves, pith helmets, and brand new yellow shoes, this metaphor of sickness makes itself felt in all social classes. Even where clothes are not actually golden, the townswomen's dresses become either patterned increasingly with yellow mimicking gold or with black foretelling death, the latter echoing Ramatou's own hieratical clothing as she awaits the outcome of her plan. It is striking to note, however, that – as with structural adjustment – the new wealth signalled by golden and yellow garments remains concentrated in the hands of the already powerful: while the poor gain short scarves, helmets and footwear, they remain dressed in sack-cloth, whereas whole suits of new clothes are the preserve of

those with civic standing, for example the Mayor and his wife. In addition, it is not the town's poor who are seen to buy up the vast quantities of electric fans, fridges and television sets that pour into the town, but instead those who are already relatively well-off, such as the Mayor's wife and Draman Drameh's.

Amplifying the impact in *Hyènes* of clothing as a visual symbol of wealth's corrupting power and power's oppressive stratification of society, images of shoes and barefootedness are a key focal point. The film's opening close-up sequences of a herd of elephants young and old walking together emphasises the ponderous movement of their feet. The scene then cuts to an extended fixed-angle shot as a mass of townsmen walks from the distance towards the camera. As they approach, the camera focuses in on their barefoot or sandaled feet, only showing their upper bodies from behind once they have passed the camera. In retrospect the audience understands these two sequences as a poignant juxtaposition of the communal society of elephants on the move protected by their matriarchs, against the splintered and individualistic society that Colobane will become once its own matriarch moves in.

Specific images of footwear occur at a high point of tension in the film. After there is a price announced on Draman Drameh's life, poor townsmen come to Draman's shop and intone ominously, 'Solidarity! To life and to death Draman! Solidarity!' before seeking credit for items they cannot afford. As they turn away from the counter, Draman notices their new yellow shoes and boots, which he identifies as imports from Burkina Faso. Later Draman notices others with new yellow shoes, and the yellow footwear becomes part of the spreading plague of golden clothing. In Dürrenmatt's play this yellow footwear 'that flower[s] like daffodils' as the townsfolk's loyalties are slowly bought by the old lady are already powerfully material as well as semiotically and phenomenologically dense (Garner 1998: 55-56), but *Hyènes* screenplay makes yet more of them. *Hyènes*' yellow shoes intensify the

effects already in play through golden costuming, but they also extend the film's symbolism in a specifically African direction. Amongst the many references to consumption and consumer products in *Hyènes*, brands are paraded both visually in the bottles, jars and bowls that line the shelves of Draman's shop, and aurally through the brand name-dropping that occurs in Draman's shop once the villagers give free rein to expensive tastes. The brands mentioned are all Francophone – Camel cigarettes, Calvados Simon - or associated with the Americas, such as Prince Albert tobacco, the Mayor's Remington typewriter and Havana Cigars. Thus, the yellow shoes and boots that take the town by storm are notably the only items specifically referred to as coming from within Africa.

The identification of a provenance in Burkina Faso is not a coincidence. A country like many others in West Africa with centuries of history of trading including slave-trading, it was uniquely renamed in 1984 when Thomas Sankara changed the colonial-era Haute Volta/Upper Volta for the hybrid Mòoré-Dioula title of 'Land of Honest People'. Yellow footwear and boots therefore channel an Afrocentric irony that is additional to the symbolism of other yellow and golden garments in the film, since the aspiration of Sankara's nomenclature is evidently disappointed through the film's vision of boots from the Land of the Honest worn by those whose loyalty is easily sold out. In addition, Burkina Faso's post-1987 history of Blaise Compaoré's murder of Sankara and abuse of presidential power shows the country's ruling élites to be far from embodying the values of the country's name. Indeed, at the time of *Hyènes*' release, while Burkina Faso was the West's poster nation for the success of rapid economic liberalisation in Africa, 'behind such facile external perceptions [...] an impoverished populace [was] ill-disposed to the traumatic imposition of market dominance' (Harsch 1998: 625). The yellowness of the footwear in *Hyènes* coupled with its Burkina Faso origins combines layers of symbolic, historical and ironic meaning to point openly to the complicity of African élites in the depredations of World Bank and IMF loan

regimes. It is significant in this regard that when Draman sees the newly purchased yellow shoes of his customers, this is not the first time that the audience has seen such shoes on screen: early in the film the rich women of Colobane dress in their finery to take up their seats on sofas lining the road that Ramatou will take to enter Colobane, and they too wear yellow shoes from Burkina Faso. While Ramatou's billions therefore accelerate cupidity in the film, Mambéty's early images of yellow shoes alert the audience to moral dubiousness and African complicity in the postcolony's structures of inequality even before the influx of external wealth and excess borrowing triggered by Ramatou's fateful return.

### **Conclusion**

The specific ontological status of footwear and its discursive mobilisation by anti-colonial authors forms the ground from which post-Independence African screen images of footwear and bare-footedness reflect on colonial and postcolonial states of being. This reflection is articulated in screen images that signal the lived black experience of apparel as oppression, an experience born of colonialism but with strong ramifications in post-Independence debates over dress, belonging and identity, and in contemporary global Western cultural and economic imperialism. The films discussed here use the mediating power of footwear images to render such oppression visible while also highlighting possibilities for agency and refashioning even within contexts of oppression. African directors thus frame clothing practices as meaningful beyond ethnographic constructions of dress as tribal or formulaic, foregrounding the dynamics of individual and group agency in creating style, and highlighting style's value as resistance to 'a mainstream culture whose principle defining characteristic [...] is to masquerade as nature' (Schoss 1996:189), whether that culture be colonial or postcolonial. Through the dialectic established in the films analysed here between images of footwear and barefootedness as oppression, and images of footwear and

barefootedness as agency, clothing as style takes shape as a form of expression that plays knowingly with colonial and postcolonial norms. Within this, footwear assumes a significance through its specifically human dimensions as both extension of, and limit to, the wearer's body. The persistent juxtaposition in each film of tropes of footwear as agency and tropes of footwear as oppression communicates against the unitary discourse of apparel as oppression that is articulated in Dadié and Fanon's anticolonial texts, and show African filmmakers marking out through their creative vision moments in the interstices of dominant cultures where style resists and agency can be returned to the subject.

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### **Filmography:**

*Borom Sarret* dir. Ousmane Sembene, (1963), black and white, 19 mins

*La Noire de...* dir. Ousmane Sembene (1966), black and white, 55 mins

*Hyènes* dir. Djibril Diop Mambéty (1992), colour, 110 mins