

**Mère-Bi received several awards at various film festivals such as:**

- **Mention spéciale : Prix du personnage, Compétition Documentaire long métrage Journées cinématographiques de Carthage 2008**
- **Prix DGCD du Meilleur Documentaire 5ème Festival des Cinémas Africains de Bruxelles, Afrique Taille XL 2009**
- **Mention Spéciale au Festival des ECRANS NOIRS de Yaoundé 2009**
- **Grand Prix du Documentaire au festival « IMAGE et VIE » Dakar 2009**
- **Ouverture du Festival du cinéma africain de Khouribga 2009**
- **FEMI d'OR 2010 du Documentaire au Festival International du Cinéma de Guadeloupe**
- **Prix du Meilleur Documentaire au FESTICAB (Burundi) 2010**

Ousmane William Mbaye's filmography: <http://mameyande.e-monsite.com/>

***Mère-Bi (Mother)***, by Ousmane William Mbaye, Les Films Mama Yandé (Dakar), Autoproduction (Paris), INA (Paris), November 2008.  
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Let's face it: our ignorance of Africa is as abysmal as the deep-rooted prejudices that most medias are prone to spread as soon as a crisis bursts out there. Africa is doomed to being viewed as a bloody land, ruled by dictators whom any democrat loves to hate. We do not pretend here to claim this huge and diverse continent is a paradise. We just ask for more awareness of its diversity. Just as it's not fair to speak of "the" French or "the" Americans as an all inclusive category, it's equally unfair to point to Schroeter's *Idi Amin Dada* or other works like it, as representative of all political life in Africa.

There is no doubt that *Mère-Bi*, cannot be a commercial success, not even one of these reference movies which help shape a different image of a complex world. Above all, it's a documentary, a tribute to a mother by her son. Nevertheless, it's well worth listening to the messages it conveys, in so far as this work may make us more aware, i.-e. more able to understand others and more cautious about slogans, whether they are blatant or academically sophisticated. Far from any complacency or egotism, this tribute may move and even change many of those who will view the film, since it applies to mothers in general, to all those who had the will and the courage to break with tradition. Unlike so many modern icons, you will find yourself admiring and respecting this woman and feel challenged in some ways by her life.

Annette Mbaye d'Erneville was Senegal's first journalist; and her son, Ousmane William Mbaye, undertook the task, through the story of her life, to write a different history of the country during the past fifty years. We all know that memory and history often are in conflict. At the same time, as the great historians Pierre Nora (*Les lieux de mémoire*) and David Lowenthal believe, "*Heritage [or memory], no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting. It fosters community, identity, and continuity, and in the end makes possible history itself. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we come from, and to what we belong.*"<sup>1</sup> In like manner, Ousmane William Mbaye's movie deals with heritage, both in a collective perspective and in a personal, intimate perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Gordon S. Wood, « No Thanks for the Memories », in his review of J. Lepore's book. *The Whites of their eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle Over American History*, in *The New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2011.

Annette Mbaye, born to an old family from Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal, the oldest French town in Africa (1659) and the former capital of Senegal, and one from Sokone, was admitted at the famous *École Normale de Rufisque*, while governor Boisson, loyal to Marshal Pétain, ruled the colony as part of the French empire. However indifferent she was to WWII and the fierce conflict between the French Free Forces and Vichy government, as she recalls, Annette meets a mentor and a model in the person of Germaine Le Goff, the head of the Rufisque School, a declared Gaullist who clings to the values of the French Republic, and anticipates Senegal's emancipation. At the time, Germaine Le Goff thought her duty was to train and prepare what were to be the future elites of an independent Senegal which would remain connected with France by the bonds of a common cultural heritage and friendship, once the colonial domination had been forgiven and much later on forgotten<sup>2</sup>.

Annette Mbaye does not elaborate on the fact that she lived a privileged existence at the *École normale de Rufisque*, where merit, according to the tradition of the true Republic, was the only source of distinction. She did, however, elaborate on discovering her equal status in France. There, she met the citizens of a country who, for the most part, being unaware of the reality of colonization, considered her as an equal. Soon after her arrival in Paris, where she attended courses at the *École normale des Batignolles*, she got in touch with the Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire, many of whose members dreamed of independence. She also happened to establish close relationships with some of the liberals (Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, among others) who supported the revolutions or the reforms to come. With a great deal of honesty, in *Mère-Bi*, Annette Mbaye recognizes that the circles she frequented were mixed, comprised of moderates and radicals. All these students felt compelled by the same duty, which was to work hard for the countries they planned to lead, in a broad sense, either through their academic competency or through political power.

Once again in a discreet way (one can easily guess she does not play the role of a heroine, she would rather make heroines possible), Annette Mbaye regrets the lack of ideal, the "*political illiteracy*" of the following generations.

The success of her long experience of Paris, where she stayed almost ten years before her returning to Senegal, both in terms of knowledge of France and acquaintances may be due to several reasons. African students, not very numerous, however critical of the French colonizer, were rather well taken care of and subsidized by the French government, who entrusted some of them with official responsibilities. Annette would be in charge of welcoming her African peers at the department of Education; all of them lived in the inner city of Paris, where they could develop a strong commitment vis-a-vis their community, meet each other very easily, while at the same time be in touch with French intellectuals and academics. Annette Mbaye was asked by Pierre Schaeffer, then director of French broadcasting programs in Africa (and better known for his work as an avant-garde composer), to manage radio programs in Wolof and French for the Senegalese audience. The decision to return to Senegal with her husband and her two children must not have been an easy one to make in 1957; certainly Senghor's charisma and leadership were difficult to resist.

Two crises deeply affected her life, a political one and a private one.

First, in 1962, Mamadou Dia, a former ally of Léopold Senghor and a former French deputy like Senghor, made an attempt of a "*coup d'Etat*", the details of which remains fairly obscure, even now. He was sentenced to jail and would be only freed in 1974. In Annette Mbaye's eyes, this was a tragedy because it ruined

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<sup>2</sup> One is surprised not to find any mention in the film of the Thiaroye events, when a French officer had Senegalese soldiers asking for their salaries and leaves of absence gunned, in the suburb of Dakar (December 1944).

the image of a peaceful and law-abiding Senegal, even more so because her country needed these two leaders. Whereas everybody recognizes and admires the high intellectual stature of Senghor, he appeared to many of his fellow citizens like a creative idealist visionary rather than as the manager and civil administrator of an emerging country. In contrast, Mamadou Dia, a former schoolmaster, was much closer to the difficulties and sufferings of the average debt-ridden Senegalese citizen, who is directly affected by the decrease in the price of groundnut and by the growing desertification of his native land. Moreover, both men may have felt contradictory loyalties and emergencies. As Annette Mbaye points out, Senegal would miss the balanced power that both of these men could have embodied.

Second, her divorce in 1963 may have been caused by an overinvestment in her social and professional lives, which did not correspond to what was expected from an African spouse.

Not involved in any political action, she then invested more and more energy in her running (sometimes labeled authoritarian) of the Senegalese radio channel, the creation of cultural programs or papers, such as *Awa*, a magazine dedicated to women, *Ciné Culture Afrique*, and the struggle for more freedom for women. In her mind, that was the way to keep working for a better future, without being manipulated by one camp or another.

This beautiful movie ends on two reminders that can be useful anywhere, any time.

Annette Mbaye recalls the collective suicide of the Ndeer women, who, in 1819, after having fought against Moorish slave-traders who they knew would return soon after for a second attack, decided to immolate themselves in a fire rather than accepting slavery: their sacrifice emphasizes that there is no negotiation with sheer evil.

Born a Catholic, but sharing the animist belief of her fellow Africans, she did not feel uncomfortable with the idea of her Muslim born daughter, Marie-Pierre, marrying a Baptist in Virginia. At a time when people enjoy speaking of torn identities, she proudly supports another perception. This perception is rooted in her own itinerary: her French and her Senegalese backgrounds, now combined with an American experience, this new amalgam demonstrates that, as challenging it may be, living several different lives makes you a better human being.

Neither a heroine nor a star: these labels would make Annette Mbaye smile since she pretends to have been first a journalist, who demurely strove to serve her country, by making its people more aware.

■ Jean-Kely Paulhan, Attaché for Higher Education, Director of CampusFrance US

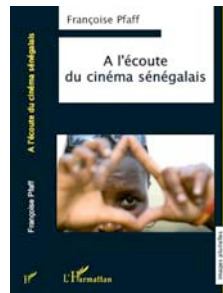


# Senegal Themed Night at La Maison Française Wednesday April 13 at 6:30 pm

*La Maison Française, 4101 Reservoir Rd NW, Washington, DC*

**Free event, but reservation required, IDs will be checked at the door.** Book on <http://www.francophoniedc.org>

La Maison Française is hosting a special evening focused on Senegal.



Dr. Françoise Pfaff, professor at Howard University, will present a conference about her book: *A LA RECHERCHE DU CINEMA SENEGALAIS* (L'Harmattan, 2010) during 30 minutes.



The movie *Mère-Bi* (*Mother*) will be screened in our auditorium (Senegal, 50 minutes, 2009)

A reception with beverage will follow the movie and Professor Pfaff will do a book signing.