



TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE

GRADES 6-12
CLASSROOM GUIDE

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TEACHING THE FILM:

Tall as the Baobab Tree is a narrative feature film about modernization and changing social values in a Senegalese village. A class screening of the film may supplement a social studies, women's studies, or global studies curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about the role that educated young people play in transforming a society. Discussion questions and supplementary materials facilitate further research into related topics such as a global concept of women's rights and the intersection of rural and urban value systems.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Tall as the Baobab Tree**. Support materials are intended to facilitate group

discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances. flkdsajfklsdajfklsadfkjdsak

ABOUT THE FILM

In a rural African village poised at the outer edge of the modern world, a teenage girl hatches a secret plan to rescue her 11-year-old sister from an arranged marriage.

A powerful voice from Africa's young generation, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* poignantly depicts a family struggling to find its footing at the outer edge of the modern world... where questions of right and wrong are not always black and white. Coumba and her little sister Debo are the first to leave their family's remote African village, where meals are prepared over open fires and water is drawn from wells, to attend school in the bustling city. But when an accident suddenly threatens their family's survival, their father decides to sell 11-year-old Debo into an arranged marriage. Torn between loyalty to her elders and her dreams for the future, Coumba hatches a secret plan to rescue her young sister from a fate she did not choose. (from the film's site <http://tallasthebaobabtree.com/story/>)

{ Jeremy Teicher (USA, 2012)
82 minutes, Color, In Pulaar and
French with English subtitles, }

Key concepts / buzzwords:

- Africa
- Arranged Marriage
- Child Marriage
- Family
- Gender
- Modernity and Tradition
- Narrative
- Rural vs. Urban
- Sisters
- Senegal
- Unprofessional Actors

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

Before watching **Tall as the Baobab Tree**, the class should locate Senegal and the village of Sinthiou Mbadane on the map.

- The class might engage in a journaling activity to explore their ideas of what life might be like for students their age in an African village.
- After watching, they can revisit their writings to compare and contrast their previous ideas with the images they saw in the film.

POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Characters and Story

1) Coumba and Debo have a close relationship. They are sisters, but they're also friends.

- How are they like sisters that you know from your own life? How are they different?
- Compare the rest of their family to your family and families in your community. How are they alike? How are they different?
- Describe Coumba's relationship with her father.

2) As students in the city with families in the village, Coumba and Amady lead lives that move between two worlds. Consider their conversation, when Coumba tells Amady how tiresome it is to work all day alone in the city, how much she would rather be tending the cows. Consider the interaction between Amady and his friends,

when he asks them for advice about approaching a girl.

- To which culture do Coumba and Amady belong?
- What do Coumba and Amady value about city life, and what do they value about village life?

3) Coumba's mother tells her not to be sad for Debo, because she herself was married early and she has everything that a woman could want. Coumba seems unconvinced by this.

- What does Coumba's mother mean by "everything a woman could want"?
- What do you think Coumba wants?

4) In spite of Coumba's efforts, the village elder rules that Debo must be sold into marriage. Debo is taken away, and it seems that tradition has triumphed over modernity. But the film ends with Coumba and Amady talking about the future.

- What is your interpretation of the ending?
- What do you think life has in store for Coumba?
- What will become of Debo?

Context

1) **Tall as the Baobab Tree** gives a portrait of family life in a village in Senegal.

- Can you identify some common stereotypes about life in rural Africa?

WHAT IS YOUR INTERPRETATION OF THE ENDING?

- ▶ • How did you imagine African life and African people before you saw the film?
- Were you surprised by what you saw?
- How were the people and places in the film similar to or different from your earlier ideas?

2) The village of Sinthiou Mbadane is near a big town, where Coumba and Amady study, but the people of the village still live a traditional pastoral lifestyle. Coumba's generation is the first in the village to study.

- How do you think the culture of the village will change as more students enter and complete the school system?
- Do you think Coumba and Amady will live in the village when they're grown up?
- How will village life change with an increasingly educated population?

3) Debo is only 11 years old, but she is going to be traded as a bride in exchange for money. Unfortunately, child marriage is still practiced in many societies around the world.

- How would you feel if your little sister was going to be sold as a second wife to a much older man?
- What if that was about to happen to you?
- What can the young generation do to change these practices?

DO YOU THINK COUMBA AND AMADY WILL LIVE IN THE VILLAGE WHEN THEY'RE GROWN UP?

Style and Message/ Reading for Media Literacy

1) The actors in the film are not professional actors; they are just regular people who live in the village. The plot of the film is based on their own life stories and stories from their community.

- In a narrative film based on a collection of true stories, where is the line between truth and fiction?

- Could you consider this kind of film a true story? Why or why not?

2) **Tall as the Baobab Tree** is set in Senegal with a Senegalese cast, but it is directed by an American filmmaker with an American camera crew. Read director Jeremy Teicher's blog post about some of the challenges and rewards that go along with cross-cultural filmmaking <http://www.zacuto.com/sharing-magic-filmmaking-rural-africa-jeremy-teicher>.

- What is your reaction to his story?
- Can you think of any other challenges that the cast and crew might have had in working together on this production?

- Why do you think Jeremy Teicher wanted to make a film set in Senegal?

- If you were going to make a film, would you go far away or stay close to home?

3) Who do you think is the intended audience for this film? Since the village of Sinthiou Mbadane has no electricity, it is safe to assume that the film is made for someone else, for an audience in the wider world.

- If someone from far away were to watch a film about your neighborhood, what story would you want them to see?

- Imagine that a director came from Senegal to your community and made a film about teenage girls and a struggle in their family. What would that film look like?

POST VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Journaling activity: the story for **Tall as the Baobab Tree** was created from the personal stories of students in the school at Sinthiou Mbadane. The issue of child marriage was a central concern to them.

- What are the central concerns among your peers, in your school?
- If a director came from another country and asked you what he or she should make a film about, what would you recommend?
- Write a logline for your film idea. A logline is a one or two sentence synopsis of the story of a film. Your logline should peak a reader's interest and make viewers excited to watch the film.

2) Child marriage is an ongoing practice in many parts of the world. Using the Girls Not Brides website as a resource (<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>), write an essay about why child marriage continues even though it is illegal and bad for young women.

- What circumstances lead to child marriage, and what work is being done to prevent it?

California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- Grade 8: Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.

- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Literature grades 6-12, provided that the film is considered a literary text. Character, plot, and structural analysis, as well as an understanding of story genres apply. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.7 Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed. How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used? What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone. Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>Media Is A Language For Information. What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience. Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason. Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>

THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.

THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've

captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover, an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

The film's "Get Involved" page

http://tallasthebaobabtree.com/get_involved/

The Girls Not Brides website

<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/how-can-we-end-child-marriage/>

The Film Africa website, with links to African films

<http://www.filmafrica.org.uk/>

African Cinema: Politics and Culture By Manthia Daiwara

<http://books.google.com/books?id=IljrInC0bmsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=African+cinema&hl=en&sa=X&ei=yUNwUeyrE8e1iAfgvoBg&ved=0CDoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=African%20cinema&f=false>

African Cinema: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings edited by Kenneth W. Harrow

<http://books.google.com/books?id=kRR2fBv2NhUC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 2012:

'Tall as the Baobab Tree' review

American director Jeremy Teicher's *Tall as the Baobab Tree* (*Grand comme le Baobab*, 2012) serves as a debut narrative follow up to a previous series of documentaries focusing on rural Senegalese communities, primarily concerned with the importance of tradition that can often come into conflict with the contemporary ideals which accompany education. Set amongst the rolling, sandy plains of the aforementioned West African country, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* simmers under the tropical climate of its dry and humid rural setting.

Two teenage girls, Coumba (Dior Ka) and Debo (Oumul Ka) - played by real life sisters - are returning to their family's village after school has finished for the summer. The contrast between their lives in the city and on their small farm couldn't be any further removed, with the suffocating hustle and bustle of the city a million miles away from the calm serenity and old-fashioned traditions of this sleepy community. However the girls' lives is thrown into disarray when their older brother - and the family's chief cow herder - breaks his leg after falling from a baobab tree.

The girls' father can't afford the hospital bills, so in order to raise the money he decides to marry-off Debo. Coumba, now fully educated, can't stand to see her younger sister sold off, so sneaks off to use her new found skills to find a job to raise the necessary funds. Beautifully shot, capturing the changing landscapes of the three worlds which compromise Coumba's journey (the city, the village and the hotel she works in), Teicher presents us with various perspectives of Senegal, further emphasised by an authentic and suitably

ethereal score which adds some much needed vibrancy to the film's often pedestrian stride.

Tall as the Baobab Tree could easily be read as a petition for universal health care, however its attention seems to be far more focused on the conflict between tradition and education. Visible through the characters' language, from the use of French in the city and Pulaar (an old tribal language) in the village, this struggle helps portray the current rise of Senegalese Nationalism (which supports the reintegration of Wolof, the country's original language). Indeed, here education (free for all children under 16) is seen as the enemy, wiping away this isolated community's cultural identity. This fear is summed up perfectly by Coumba's mother, who states, "All we have is our culture".

Carried by the overwhelming love of the film's three siblings, torn between their religious beliefs and their village's strict cultural code, Teicher's narrative debut is an uncomplicated tale told humbly through recognisable narrative techniques and as a much exposition as possible. *Tall as the Baobab Tree* may not be a cinematic revelation, however its unassuming tale makes for a modest, enjoyable viewing experience.

VARIETY REVIEW:

Generational values clash in a Senegalese town in “Tall as the Baobab Tree,” American director Jeremy Teicher’s quietly eloquent first fiction feature.

by Ronnie Scheib

Generational values clash in a Senegalese town in “Tall as the Baobab Tree,” American director Jeremy Teicher’s quietly eloquent first fiction feature. Based on real-life situations and more than competently thespied by the villagers of Sinthion Mbadane themselves, the film never takes sides, maintaining a remarkably sympathetic balance between the ancient survivalist traditions of the elders and the aspirations of their educated offspring. “Baobab” also avoids feeling forced or artificially picturesque, combining the artlessness of documentary with the aesthetic unity of fiction. But its simple story may prove too uneventful even for arthouse auds.

Coumba (Dior Ka), the first member of her family to be educated, has just successfully passed her exams when her older brother, Sileye (Alpha Dia), falls from a baobab tree, seriously injuring his leg. Teicher establishes the film’s city/country, education/tradition dichotomy early on, cutting between scenes of Coumba, walking to her urban school with her visiting younger sister, Debo (Oumoul Ka), and shots of Sileye, gracefully clambering around the baobab tree, cutting tender shoots for the livestock below.

With Sileye’s leg requiring expensive procedures, the children’s father (Mouhamed Diallo) dispatches Coumba to watch the herd, and arranges to marry 11-year-

old Debo to a rich man, but Coumba and Debo both recoil at the idea. Debo had hoped to follow in her big-sister’s footsteps, and Coumba, with a student’s idealism, believes she can easily land work to earn enough for Sileye’s treatments. But when she finally finds employment as a maid, the pay doesn’t meet her lofty expectations. Meanwhile, her father interviews prospective bridegrooms, and her mother (Mboural Dia) tries to reconcile her daughters to tradition.

Teicher treats the cultural split between generations as a constantly mediated middle ground, where respect demands compromise on both sides. Having previously lived in the village while shooting an earlier documentary, he easily hooks into the differing rhythms of the rural areas, with their lack of running water or electricity, and the city, with its conveniences but somewhat alienating work, careful to show intrinsic value in each. Chris Collins’ serene lensing highlights the family’s closeness and its connection to the environment, while Jay Wadley’s African harp score adds to the pic’s authenticity.