

University of California, Los Angeles

Cinematic Revolutions: Oppression and Resistance in *Bush Mama* and *Sambizanga*

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FILMTV 112

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May 17, 2024

The “Film and Social Change” festival aims to feature cinematic works that challenge societal norms and provoke thought on issues of justice, equality, and activism. This year’s festival focuses on films that not only document social injustices but also inspire political action and resistance. Among the carefully curated selections are *Bush Mama*, directed by Haile Gerima in 1979, and *Sambizanga*, directed by Sarah Maldoror in 1972. These films, though set in different contexts, one in the urban ghettos of Southern California and the other in the colonial regions of Angola, share a common thread in their exploration of systemic oppression and the resilience of marginalized communities. Through the powerful narratives of *Bush Mama* and *Sambizanga*, the films expose the pervasive oppression faced by marginalized communities and demonstrate the crucial role of women in leading resistance and advocating for social change.

Bush Mama and *Sambizanga* were chosen for the “Film and Social Change” festival due to their powerful portrayals of marginalized communities facing systemic injustices. Both films explore themes of oppression and resistance, revealing how colonialism and racism impact African-Americans in the U.S. and Angolans under Portuguese rule. Central to these narratives is the role of women in social change, with Dorothy in *Bush Mama* and Maria in *Sambizanga* leading the resistance against oppressive structures. The films also address economic struggle and class inequality, exposing poverty and systemic barriers. Family and community emerge as vital sites of resistance, demonstrating collective strength against oppression. Both films depict the violence of state power, with *Bush Mama* showing police brutality and *Sambizanga* illustrating colonial torture and detention. These shared themes make the films compelling choices for the festival, as they inspire reflection and engagement with social change and resistance.

Bush Mama, directed by Haile Gerima, offers a raw and uncompromising look at the

struggles of African-Americans living in the ghettos of Southern California. The film follows Dorothy, a welfare recipient, as she navigates through the harsh realities of poverty, systemic racism, and institutional oppression. The relevance of *Bush Mama* to the “Film and Social Change” festival lies in its portrayal of these issues, which continue to resonate in contemporary society. According to Grundy, the film exposes how the welfare system is designed to keep marginalized individuals powerless and confused through deliberate contradictions and mixed messages.¹ This exploration of systemic racism and structural oppression emphasizes the film’s importance in demonstrating the need for social change and resistance. Gerima’s depiction of these systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities makes *Bush Mama* a powerful addition to the festival.

A key scene in *Bush Mama* that exemplifies Haile Gerima’s approach to political action occurs in the film’s final moments. Dorothy, having endured countless struggles, reaches a point of profound transformation and resistance. In the final shot, she is captured sitting in her apartment, staring directly at the camera. Her wig, which she wore throughout the film to conform to societal expectations, has been removed, symbolizing her rejection of imposed norms and her embrace of her true identity.² This powerful visual statement reveals her emerging strength and resistance against the systemic injustices that have long constrained her. The scene captures Dorothy’s unyielding gaze, with the MPLA poster prominently displayed on the wall behind her, shifting focus between her determined expression and the symbol of political resistance. This direct confrontation with the audience not only reveals Dorothy’s personal rebellion but also acts as a broader appeal, urging the audience to recognize and challenge the pervasive structures of oppression depicted throughout the film. Grundy argues that the film’s

¹ David Grundy, “Occupied Territory and Abolitionist Freeze Frames: Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama*,” in *Senses of Cinema* (July 2021), 2.

² Haile Gerima, *Bush Mama* (1979; screening: 4/29, 1 hr 37 min, accessed in class at UCLA University), 1:34:26.

final shot, where Dorothy is shown in freeze-frame, having removed her wig and staring directly at the camera with the MPLA poster on the wall behind her, symbolizes her rejection of imposed identities and aligns her personal struggle with broader political resistance.³ This analysis emphasizes the significance of this scene in demonstrating the director's approach to using cinema as a catalyst for political action.

Sambizanga, directed by Sarah Maldoror, provides a compelling portrayal of the Angolan independence struggle against Portuguese colonial rule. The film follows the harrowing journey of Maria as she searches for her husband, Domingos, who has been imprisoned and tortured for his involvement in the independence movement. The relevance of *Sambizanga* to the "Film and Social Change" festival comes from its portrayal of colonial oppression and the relentless fight for liberation. Figge's analysis emphasizes the film's portrayal of resistance and Maria's evolution from a hesitant participant to a determined activist. Figge notes Maria's transformation through "Maria's first tentative, later increasingly determined departure from the village, her persistent journey through the land to the capital,...she raises her voice against the colonial power."⁴ This illustrates Maria's transformation and the broader struggle against colonial forces, demonstrating the film's powerful narrative of resilience and resistance. Through its detailed portrayal of personal and collective struggles, *Sambizanga* exemplifies the enduring spirit of resistance that is central to the festival's theme.

A key scene in *Sambizanga* that exemplifies Sarah Maldoror's approach to political action is the depiction of Domingos's torture and his subsequent death. This scene powerfully illustrates the brutality of the colonial regime and the human cost of the struggle for independence. Domingos's wounded body, held and comforted by his imprisoned fellow inmates

³ Grundy, 7.

⁴ Maja Figge, "Towards a Caring Gaze: Aesthetics of Decolonization in Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga*," in *Journal of Communication and Languages* no. 54 (2021), 166.

until his death, becomes a powerful image of vulnerability, mortality, and humanity. This portrayal reveals the collective solidarity among the prisoners and demonstrates the emotional and physical toll of their resistance.⁵ The camera captures the raw agony of Domingos's physical pain, his face twisted in anguish, while his fellow prisoners surround him, offering words of comfort and solidarity. This scene not only humanizes the struggle but also demonstrates the strength and resilience of the oppressed community.⁶ The torture scenes in *Sambizanga* are crucial in demonstrating the director's approach to political action. By focusing on Domingos's agency, these scenes reveal his unwavering resistance to the colonial authorities' attempts to break his spirit. Figge notes, "The two torture scenes in *Sambizanga*, however, by focusing on Domingos's agency, reveal his resistance to this attempt."⁷ This reveals Domingos's resilience and determination, serving as a powerful statement against the dehumanizing tactics of the colonial regime. Through these scenes, Maldoror not only documents the brutality of the oppressors but also honors the enduring spirit of resistance among the oppressed, making *Sambizanga* an essential contribution to the festival's exploration of social change and political action.

Both *Bush Mama* and *Sambizanga* portray women playing crucial roles in social change, demonstrating their resilience and leadership in resisting oppressive systems. Dorothy's journey in *Bush Mama* culminates in a powerful act of resistance that fits into a broader tradition of black women's violence as a unique form of action. Grundy notes, "Dorothy's action in the closing scene part of 'a tradition of black women's violence as a distinct form or mode of action.'"⁸ This shows the significance of her character in challenging systemic oppression and advocating for

⁵ Figge, 168.

⁶ Sarah Maldoror, *Sambizanga* (1972. Screening: 4/10, 1 hr 37 min. Accessed in class at UCLA University), 1:20:57.

⁷ Figge, 166.

⁸ Grundy, 6.

justice. Similarly, Maria in *Sambizanga* transforms from a tentative participant to a determined activist, symbolizing the collective resistance against colonial rule. The film emphasizes her role in the struggle through scenes that connect her personal journey to the broader independence movement. Figge observes, “The smuggled message as well as the crosscut search of Maria and the militants, and finally the close-up of the Black guard’s face, unites Domingos with the collective.”⁹ This demonstrates the connection between individual and collective efforts in the fight for liberation. Both films, through their portrayal of Dorothy and Maria, demonstrate the critical roles women play in leading and sustaining resistance movements, reinforcing the importance of their contributions to social and political change.

Bush Mama and *Sambizanga* are significant in the context of social change as they vividly portray the struggles and resistance of marginalized communities against systemic oppression. These films illustrate the enduring impact of colonialism, racism, and economic inequality, while showing the crucial role of women in leading these movements. Cinema, as shown through these works, plays a crucial role in documenting social injustices and inspiring political action. These films are important for the “Film and Social Change” festival because they not only expose the widespread oppression faced by marginalized communities but also demonstrate the crucial role of women in leading resistance and advocating for social change, aligning perfectly with the festival’s mission to promote awareness and inspire activism.

⁹ Figge, 168.

Bibliography

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Gerima, Haile. *Bush Mama*. 1979. Screening: 4/29, 1 hr 37 min. Accessed in class at UCLA University.

Maldoror, Sarah. *Sambizanga*. 1972. Screening: 4/10, 1 hr 37 min. Accessed in class at UCLA University.

Appendix I.: Images



Still from *Bush Mama*, directed by Haile Gerima. 1979. Screening: 4/29, 1 hr 37 min. Accessed in class at UCLA University.



Still from *Sambizanga*, directed by Sarah Maldoror. 1972. Screening 4/10, 1 hr 37 min. Accessed in class at UCLA University.