“Must we […] forever […] as brothers be condemned to hate one another?” asks Esau, one of the main characters in Malian filmmaker Cheik Oumar Sissoko’s *La Genese*. In the filmic contextualization of the Old Testament stories of Dinah and Shechem; Jacob and Esau; Leah and Rachel, Sissoko explores notions of Reconciliatory Justice as opposed to Western understandings of Retributive Justice. He adapts African Oral and Literary Traditions to re-imagine a continent where African Socialism makes peaceful co-existence possible. He insists that nations, not only individuals, have to learn to occupy the same continent, the same world. Re-imagining the African Oral and Literary Tradition plays an important part in the African search for identity where story and identity are inseparable. Yet, for generations the story of Africa has been the story about Africa: those who invented the printed word claimed superior story-telling powers and “Oral Man” was silenced. Today those about whom the story was told are telling their own story, re-appropriating their own literary tradition, re-discovering a culture that no longer orient itself according to imposed values. This paper looks at how the African Oral Tradition, by definition a fluid medium, can be adapted within the filmic genre, a fixed medium. It asks how the story of yesterday becomes the story of today as Sissoko’s exploration of the narrative of the descendants of Abraham through the lens of African Literary Tradition presents interesting possibilities for an African peace based on justice.

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Keywords:

1. Introduction

Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press altered the topography of the globe perhaps more than anything else has done in the last few hundred years. Its invention provided the rationale for a multitude of global shifts. Most importantly it divided the world into two camps: the custodians of the printed word, also of the Bible, the Written Word, who were in the light of God’s love and those who remained literally benighted, in unredeemed soulless
darkness. Mendelssohn’s 1840 commemoration of the invention of the printing press in his great hymn of praise, the Lobgesang, compares the discovery of printing to the Genesis account of God separating day from night. And so, as “Oral Man” was created a whole continent – Africa – was condemned to silence \(^\dagger\) and colonial Europe told the story of Africa, “mostly […] to suit a white purpose” (Achebe 2009:61).

As the story of Africa became the story about Africa, both literature and education fostered an erosion of identity as school children, educated in Western ways, learned narratives about themselves to which none in their community had contributed. In (Gurnah’s, 2001) By the sea one of the narrators comments on the sense of having been “remade” through the colonial education system (p.18). This alienation from the self has been evident until well after Uhuru during the 1960s when the majority of African nations gained independence from colonial rule. Thus (Achebe, 2009) tells of his daughter being given a book in which she reads how members of “an African village” worship a kite that blew way (p.70). This humiliating portrayal of Africans appalls him and highlights the importance of Africans re-appropriating their identity, of learning to spell their “proper name” (p.54f.).

Today Africans are telling their own story, and “in the story of our times […] the narrative has slipped out of the hands of those who had control of it before. These new stories, told in the words and languages of Africa, unsettle previous understandings” (Gurnah & Nasta 2005:358). They draw on African traditions and African socio-political interpretations of the world; adapt the genre of the story; re-structure the African Oral Literary Tradition which continues to be relevant in a changing world. (Smith, 2012) in Decolonizing Methodologies speaks of a reversal of the process when those who “[…] came […] saw […] named […] claimed (p.83) now have to acknowledge there are “other ways of knowing.” These ways are found in the collective memory of “indigenous” peoples who increasingly assert their adherence to understandings of life once marginalized but whose value is being re-discovered. This re-articulation of indigenous \(^\dagger\) worldviews acknowledges “distinctly different ways of thinking about and naming” the world and human interaction (cf. p.127). By “engag[ing] quite deliberately in naming the world according to an indigenous world view […] indigenous values, attitudes and practices” are brought to the center and are no longer disguised within Westernized labels (p.128). While once “the disciplines of Western knowledge were used as a platform for dismissing or denying the existence of indigenous knowledge” (p.222), today the story is told by those at home in Western understandings of the world, yet comfortable with indigenous interpretations of reality.

2. Re-appropriating the African Oral and Literary Tradition

The African Oral Literary Tradition has become a dynamic part of African written and filmic literature. Through its incorporation African artists adapt Western-based literary genres: not merely through the inclusion of proverbs and songs and an African landscape, but through adaptations with regard to time and space, as well as of history and of understandings of the self. Through language identity is re-created. Yet, maintaining the essential character of the Oral Tradition, a medium which is by definition fluid, as it is incorporated into the fixed written or filmic medium challenges these artists’ creativity.

(Brown, 1998:96-101) speaks of the deep mistrust the written word engendered. In treaties which cannot be trusted it led to territorial dispossessio:n; in the translation of the Bible, which is both treacherous and deceitful, and in mission education, it resulted in cultural misunderstanding and engineered cultural deprivation. In Xhosa the word for book is “incwadi;” which refers to “a poisonous bulb found on the veld which is capable of having its layers stripped off one by one, as one might tear off the pages from a book” (Shepherd 1948, cited on p.96). Yet today African literary artists use written and filmic mediums to re-incorporate the Oral Literary Tradition. Creating their own stories, they adopt dominant Western literary genres to reflect African understandings of self and society. Whereas stories originating in Western societies have a clear beginning middle and end and a main protagonist is indispensable, stories from Africa begin in media res; the understanding of time and history is cyclical rather than linear; individuals, seldom in conflict with the community, are members of a society in conflict with itself, a society where even the most “insignificant” is important and makes a valuable contribution.

\(^\ddagger\) Smith comments: “indigenous” communities is a contentious term and may be dangerous to use. Such communities may be defined as ethnic groups (in China); as “tribals” in India; as “peasants” in South America; as “de-registered ‘criminals’” in India (p. xii).
Unlike in Western literature, the history of individuals in African literature cannot be separated from that of their society which is itself a character in the narrative. This history is understood in terms of events rather than of dates as the story of yesterday becomes the story of today; it is the lesson of the now in which hearers participate and for which they create their own ending. The past is represented in the present (Brown 1998:108) as events re-enacting the society’s past, performed in song and dance, move cyclically back to their beginning to make a new beginning (today) possible. Justice is reconciliatory rather than retributive as every attempt is made to re-incorporate individuals whose conflicted history reflects society’s history. The humor with which the story is told is not merely geared to audience psychology; it is part of the action, allows teaching and reflection.

Africa film has a history of struggle and opposition. Whereas once “the colonized [was] forced to accept the superiority of colonial culture” (Brown 1998:170), African filmmakers’ main concern today is “to take back the right of self-representation, to control the image rather than be a quaint native object of the Western desire to Orientalize, to diminish or to deny” (Slome: 1996). Filmic representations incorporate Oral Literary Traditions; discard adherence to dogmas formulated by others; move beyond learned perceptions of history, time and space; understand narrative as others – perhaps the majority of our world – understand story-telling.

3. La Genese

Cheick Oumar Sissoko’s (1999) film La Genese relocates the story of Genesis to Mali. The Biblical narrative reflects issues facing modern Africa; becomes part of African Oral and Literary Tradition, and is told in Bambara. The Biblical story of Genesis is contextualized within Africa. The setting for the exploration of current political-religious realities is the story of Jacob and his family. The Biblical Patriarchs are recognizable as such, yet are embedded in African culture and are recognizably African in the manner in which they are portrayed.

The film’s introduction is in French – the former colonizer’s language. It is dedicated “to all the victims of fratricide” and “to all who make peace.” What is meant both by fratricide and by peace is one of the film’s key issues. The initial dedication in French reminds of the debate between Ngugi wa Thiong’o who wanted Africans to reclaim their identity by using only their own language; and Chinua Achebe who pointed out that today the former oppressor’s language unites Africa’s linguistically diverse people. The rest of the film is in Bambara with subtitles in various Western languages. Thus linguistic and cultural divides between former colonizer and formerly colonized become tangible: the tables are turned on those who once told Africa’s story without consulting the nations whose lives and cultures they depicted. Western film audiences, now in a position similar to that of the formerly colonized, are dependent on understanding the action, especially as subtitles do not always correspond to actual dialogue. Audiences’ familiarity with the original Biblical text does not necessarily help them - the narrative elements are re-cast.

The film’s setting, loosely based on Genesis 23-37, is definitely Africa. Hollywood films portray Africa using African-American (definitely American!) stars. The cast in La Genese is African. African in their actions and responses to life, they are yet recognizable as Scriptural characters. There is no Hollywood hype; the sounds of Africa - children playing, cattle, chickens, sheep, camels, people going about their daily business - are sufficient backdrop. The landscape is harsh yet emotionally evocative. Esau, his demeanor that of a religious leader, addresses God. True to the Oral tradition, he places himself within his ancestry - “son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Adam” - and within his current situation - “elder brother of Jacob.” Jacob calls Hamor “son of Noah.” All this acknowledge the common ancestors of all the peoples whose lives intersect. It is their story which is re-enacted here on Mali’s Hombori Tondo Escarpment in the shadow of Mali’s highest peak, the Hombori Tondo, whose caves are the burial place for the ancestors of the Tellem who lived there before the Dogon did.

Three ways of life characteristic of Africa are reflected: Esau the hunter, at home in the wilderness, is one of the mountain men; Hamor and his people represent farmers and villagers settled on the land. They live in brick houses; store food; have granaries. Shechem, prince of the land, works the fields; children herd livestock; lift water out of human-dug wells; Jacob and his family exemplify the (semi-)nomadic pastoralists who live in tents and of whom Hamor’s people say they are lazy and have neither morals nor cultural values. These three clans’ ways of life reflect Africa’s conflicts: land issues; tribalism; corruption (Esau says of his relationship with Jacob: “we were brothers bound by the honey of justice. He stole the honey and ate it by himself); religious conflict; discrimination against women and “others.”
Esau challenges God: “Lord, you created the world and there was no water. Then you created Man, and still no water. The dry wind made him cry: I thirst! Then, you created woman, unquenchable thirst. But why then did you create brothers? Must we live forever with this drought and thirst? And as brothers be condemned to hate one another?”

And here is Africa’s fundamental question: what is the nature of our brotherhood – how can we learn to live together? Are we truly condemned forever to hate one another?

The relationship of individuals to the ancestors is one of the pillars of La Genese as shared familial humanity becomes an opportunity for peace. Scriptural and filmic perceptions of identity converge in the familial relatedness of Africa’s tribes. The Scriptures portray the relatedness even of Jacob with Hamor (not through Shechem’s relationship with Dinah). Similarly, amongst Africa’s older people many can recite the ancestral genealogies over several generations, thus establishing kinship and societal relationships. La Genese celebrates this visually: whenever the elders in the community of nations meet they acknowledge in elaborate and complex dialogue their shared ancestry. Thus for example Jacob and Hamor, two princes of ancient times who appropriate wisdom, identify themselves as: Jacob the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham the prophet, the son of Noah “our” father; and Hamor the nephew of Nimrod, the son of Canaan and father of nations, cousin of Jacob. In that sharing they pour libations to the common ancestors. Yet, as he adapts the Biblical narrative to address issues relating to water, resources, and the birth order, Sissoko points out that ironically it is precisely in this shared familial humanity that Africa’s conflicts are rooted. Isaac’s birth displaces Ishmael, Abraham’s first-born; Jacob steals Esau’s birth right. In the film Jacob accuses Leah’s sons of murdering their brother, Joseph – her younger sister Rachel’s son. Africa’s story becomes a story of brotherhood gone awry; of resources misappropriated.

3.1. Appropriating the African Literary Tradition (The world is torn asunder . . . Each devours his neighbor’s flesh.)

Genesis 27-33 is a story of rape, murder, genocide as Jacob’s sons avenge their sister Dinah’s rape. They trick Shechem and his entire clan into being circumcised and then murder them. Rape and looting are part of the punitive action. Sissoko’s La Genese likewise revolves around these incidents, yet is couched within the African tradition, not merely through the use of African proverbs – of which there are many – but through daring to imagine a different outcome to the one in the Biblical Scriptures shared by the three monotheistic religions.

In line with African Literary Tradition La Genese begins in media res, several generations after the great flood. Unlike in Western literary traditions, time and history are not linear, but cyclical: the story of “yesterday” becomes the story of “today.” Time and history, even Biblical time and history, are not “chronological” as those who read the Scriptures believe; they are in the “now.” In song and performance the story of yesterday becomes today’s immediate lesson. Events move cyclically back to the beginning and make new beginnings possible. The nations are defined by the unifying story of Isaac and Rebecca, the story of the common ancestors, the shared communities from which they come; not by the divisive story of the Ishmael/Isaac sacrifice. Jacob, Hamor and Esau are all children of the same parents. But there is a long road before this point of recognition is reached.

Sissoko’s narration of the story is distinctive of African Literature where each individual is indispensable and has a story to tell. Unlike in liberal humanist narrative, no individual is in conflict with the society. Instead, the society - the definition of which goes beyond the narrow cultural or national - is itself a character and is in conflict with itself. The resolution of that conflict is the only hope for peace for individuals inhabiting that specific social order. And true to the African approach to life - a good dose of humor puts even the most tragic issues into perspective and highlights the brokenness of sinful humanity. Unlike in Western theatre where humor usually follows serious scenes to help relieve rising tension (for example the drunken porter scene after Duncan’s murder in Shakespeare’s Macbeth), in La Genese humor precedes momentous events. As Dinah seduces Shechem we see village boys herding cattle; climbing down wells to look for water; triumphantly high-fiving one another - all want to be present as the rape-marriage ritual that has been unfolding it seems for quite a while - and is in many ways Dinah’s assertion of independence. It reaches its inevitable climax with the ululating women triumphantly displaying the blood stained white sheet; proclaiming that “the lion made Jacob’s bitches bleed.” As Dinah challenges her new father-in-law, tells him: “Princes carry gold to their in-laws. They speak softly at their weddings,” the sense of impending conflict is almost palpable.

Similarly, humor permeates the scene as Hamor’s men are circumcised by the village blacksmith. The whole village participates; we hear him sharpening his knife; women comment as men stand in line - one tells the blacksmith: “Don’t cut it all off, okay? That’s my medicine;” chickens, given the excised body parts, cluck happily.
The scene, an example of Sissoko’s approach to feminist concerns, in its humor is also a side swipe at female circumcision where girl children are lined up to endure excruciating pain. Now, it is men’s turn to know what such a “ceremony” feels like. The humor acts as a foil to the horrific genocide which immediately follows. And genocide it is as in both the film and the Scriptures all males are ruthlessly murdered and Jacob’s sons “carried off all their wealth, their women, and their children” (Gen. 34:26-29). Jacob’s sons do not remember that Hamor, Shechem’s father, alone of all the region’s peoples had shown Jacob hospitality and had sold him the land on which they lived (Gen. 33:19). In La Genese Sissoko here recognizes a metaphor for early colonialism where African tribes welcomed Europeans; granted them permission to live on ancestral land, only to find themselves displaced and murdered.

The film’s scenes of brutal carnage similarly call into question the command God apparently gives His people throughout the Old Testament to exterminate all males of heathen nations. The weeping heard in the film - the only sound after the massacre - is reminiscent of Rachel weeping for her children in the massacre of the Holy Innocents. The filmic representation of the Biblical genocide goes beyond the religious to remind of genocides committed globally during the last one hundred years. We do not even have to go as far afield as Germany’s gas ovens with its six million dead Jews and gypsies and black Africans, exterminated in the name of racial purity; or Bosnia with its massacre and genocide of Muslim populations. We need only cast our eyes to Rwanda with its Hutu-Tutsi conflicts; the Congo’s more than six million dead; Darfur with at least 500,000 dead; Uganda; Somalia; Sudan; Nigeria; Mali; the Central African Republic. The list goes on and on. As in the Biblical story, La Genese points to land issues which bedevil African continent since colonization and the artificial creation of countries: conflicts in Kenya’s Tana River Delta; land seizures in Zimbabwe; threatening land conflicts in South Africa; the new Scramble for Africa’s resources.

3.2. What then the hope for peace?

In the Biblical story Jacob’s rather weak response to this unjustified massacre - the only ostensible reason being Dinah’s defilement - is that he and his family will be wiped out if those who have been wronged decide to revenge themselves (Gen.34:30). And no more is said either of Dinah or of this incident. Dinah is never asked her feelings for Shechem; she has no voice, no life outside her male relatives’ perception of their - not her - honor. It does not matter that the man who wants to marry their sister is a prince of the land “more highly respected than anyone else in his clan” (Gen.34:19); that marriage between Dinah and Shechem is in fact a good alliance and could secure for them peaceful co-existence in Canaan. By contrast Sissoko’s story does not end where the Biblical story ends; it does not end with headlines screaming outrage. Sissoko appropriates the freedom the African Literary Tradition gives him: he takes the stories of the past and places them in the now of the present. He imagines a different ending to Jacob and Hamor’s story. Hamor stays alive: one of his wives hides him under her capacious clothes. Instead of whining that he might now become the next victim of genocide, Jacob the film character finally leaves his tent for a while and the two clan elders commiserate with each other on the loss of their respective sons. Hamor prophesies:

“Jacob! The world has become as it was before the great flood. Evil everywhere, famine is spreading, drought and quarrels have emptied our granaries. In a year at most your animals will die. My lineage has been extinguished. The entire earth will be the prey of ferocious beasts.”

And then he makes the proposal that may lead to peace:

“Let us assemble the nations of the earth, and talk until we reach an agreement.”

In the film all define themselves not as in the West by specific dates, but as in Africa by ancestral events. The defining event here is the world re-born after the great flood; a world which has regressed to mirror today’s reality. And so Esau carries with him a tortoise who seems to respond when he addresses her as: “daughter of Noah, who saw the last honest man who saved her from the flood.” And Jacob addresses Hamor the Hivite as “my cousin, son of Noah” which in fact he is, even in the Biblical tradition, ironically also through one of Esau’s wives - Oholibama: the daughter of Anah, the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite (Gen.36:2). The validity of Hamor’s prophecies can only be “reversed” once the inter-relationship between people and nations is acknowledged; peace has been established; and reconciliation with Joseph and by implication with the murdered Shechem is realized.

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Establishing conditions for this peace is the focus of the second half of the film. Jacob promises: “Hamor, my people will be at the council of nations.” He himself refuses to come, decides to continue mourning Joseph and now also Shechem. Hamor, whom he sees as his voice and his soul, will represent them both. While admitting the new kinship to Hamor through Shechem who had fulfilled the conditions to marry Dinah, Jacob is even now not willing to admit co-responsibility in the unfolding disaster. He continually withdraws into the darkness of his tent which contrasts sharply with the dazzling sunlight outside. He refuses to rein in his sons and so the darkness of his tent and the nighttime massacre of those they deceived becomes an extension of his mindset. Although he repudiates his sons, the responsibility for the genocide remains his. No amount of diplomatic wheeling and dealing can negate this. Jacob’s attitude reflects the African leadership crisis at the root of many of the continent’s conflicts. Yet, even though his sons are guilty of genocide, Jacob promises their participation in the Council of Nations. The African understanding of Ubuntu, of reconciliatory justice instead of the retributive justice characteristic of Western legal systems, guarantees their safety. Sissoko’s stance here is reminiscent of Bishop Tutu’s insistence that there is no situation that is not transfigurable; “that in confronting the past the stories of the “little people” would be heard and festering wounds would be opened and cleansed; and individuals and nations could re-formulate / re-imagine their history’s outcome. Victims and perpetrators would learn to co-exist in the same national-geographic space. Reconciliation, not revenge, is the goal of African justice. Thus the process is a public one; it involves all of society, all of whose members together - men, women, children, ancestors, descendants - have to find a way forward. And here the hope of peace in Africa.

3.3. Proceedings of the Council of Nations

Amidst moving scenes of pilgrimage to the sacred place of the ancestors, accompanied by the women’s praise singing, the nations of the earth - a United Nations of Africa - gather on Mali’s Hombori Tondo Escarpment in the shadow of Mali’s Sacred Mountain to talk, to face African conflicts - not in Europe or in New York or at the ICC in The Hague, but at the scene of the conflict. Unlike in the Western-based United Nations the focus is not on problem-solving, but on individual and national relationships. All are present: men, women, children. All are allowed to speak as Sissoko creates parallelisms between the fates of people from both genders.

This social unity, in line with the tenets of African socialism, is evident throughout the film. Thus the whole clan is present as Shechem brings Dinah to his home; all participate in discussions between Hamor and Shechem whom Hamor calls “the prince of fools” for having got involved with Jacob’s nomadic tribe whom they accuse of having neither values nor work ethic; all the men are part of the agreement between Hamor and Jacob’s sons and submit to circumcision. The women too are included: they are present during the male circumcision ceremony; Hamor, calling Leah a “great and noble lady,” tries to comfort her for the loss of her daughter; at the Assembly of Nations they speak in the presence of men. They voice grievances they ask to be addressed in a world where crimes against women cannot be separated from crimes committed by nations against nations. Thus, conspiracies of silence are ended; lies and hypocrisy are brought into the open; those who settled on land not originally theirs are forced to abide by the rules of those whose territory they now inhabit.

As the African Nations enter Leah triumphantly sings Jacob’s praises, proclaiming God’s promise to him and his descendants of the ground he walks on. Despite God’s promise that Jacob will bless the nations, the reference here is to the colonial and religious imperialism which has resulted in today’s devastating religion-fuelled conflicts. In the film, the other nations soon make Jacob’s sons realize that being “chosen” and fighting in God’s name is not an excuse for atrocities. Theirs is to bless, not to bully the nations of the earth. Hamor whose whole lineage has been exterminated, attends the African Council of Nations followed by the only genocide survivors, the women of his tribe, including Dinah. Healing takes place when all present mourn his loss. The wife who saved him calls the other attendees “brothers” and “sisters.” While Jacob’s wife justifies her tribe’s existence and its excesses through reference to divine election, Hamor’s wife appeals not to the divine, but to the human, to her community’s people.

** Interview with Bill Moyers (1999).
†† “Tutu and the TRC” (2009). / Gier (2009). Tutu: “While the Allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg, we in South Africa had to live with one another.”
Characteristic of the African Literary Tradition: not God, but the community, in conflict with itself, is asked to deal with divisive issues. Detailing Hamor’s tragedy, she accuses Jacob’s sons. She tells the community that “Hamar’s path leaves no traces.” She asks the community “Seek out why death followed the path of his life […] and tell him why!” The community responds as women give their children to heal Hamor’s loss: “Hamar our father, this son is yours. Look he is leaving traces on the path of life.” As the father of sons Hamor regains credibility as a national leader. Significantly the promise that there are “not enough stars to count your descendants” comes from the community. He makes no claim to divine revelation.

By contrast, Dinah, with no voice in the Biblical text, here speaks of mourning and loss; of grief that day “cannot wear night’s mourning.” In a striking parallelism to Hamor’s fate where “death came upon his steps and wiped them all out,” Dinah’s steps likewise leave no trace. Through marriage she no longer belongs to Jacob’s tribe; with Shechem’s death her lineage has been obliterated. Yet unlike Hamor the community does not “give” her children; she is removed from his tent as she was from that of her brothers who used her defiled honor as an excuse to commit genocide. The women advise her to abort should she be pregnant by Shechem because she is “too fair to give birth to the spirits of war.” She seems to lose her mind, yet is not left desolate. Her body leaves no footprints, yet she becomes one of the mediators between the ancestors and the living. Her presence, her wild laughter, testify discrimination against women characterizes the injustice between individuals and nations.

There are no guiltless victims. Like Bishop Tutu in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission Sissoko avoids perpetrator-victim dichotomies - the fairy-tale paradigm determining good versus evil political models central to Western literature. Very practically: all have been wronged, all have sinned - all are both victims and perpetrators. This is true even of the victimized women: Dinah who initiates her seduction and rape; Leah who has been unfairly treated by Jacob yet is heard to tell Dinah to “smear blood on Joseph, son of Rachel’s tunic;” and caresses her sons after the genocide - the implication being that she approves of what happened.

As the nations gathered in the presence of the ancestors under Mali’s Hombori Tondo Mountain begin to dialogue, individual disputes are judged as societal and national issues. The stories of sinful hypocrisy are not only told, but in true African Literary Tradition, are performed. Thus Hamor demands an accounting as the supposed death of Joseph who shone “like a star in the night” left no traces. The assembled nations hear there was no sign of a struggle; the brothers showed no signs of having confronted the wild beasts that apparently tore him apart. Jackals and wild beasts who now guard Jacob’s cattle they are told, also exterminated Shechem’s clan. Jacob’s sons, avoiding the implied accusation, refer to Dinah’s rape, propose a peace treaty: racial purity will be ensured; their women kept away from the lust of Hamor’s people. The assembled nations meet their lascivious comments about the attraction Hamor’s people have for their women with derision. The hypocrisy of their proposal is graphically revealed. Judah has a child with Ada, a Canaanite prince’s daughter. If the peace treaty which Jacob’s sons have proposed and which they say will be unbreakable is adopted, then Shela, the son of this relationship should be cut in

Despite the genocide committed against him, Hamor too is not innocent. Material considerations led to his allowing himself to be duped by Jacob - something Esau predicted as he watched the marriage negotiations from his mountain hideout. The mention of Hamor’s blacksmith and the circumcision of all the men triggers religious sentiments. Hamor is accused of doubting and profaning the twelve gods of Canaan. Physical confrontation ensues, people flee the scene. It is a re-enactment of Africa’s many conflicts apparently generated by religious attitudes; an allusion to hundreds of thousands of displaced peoples. As war threatens, Jacob finally relinquishes his vow never to leave his tent and joins the proceedings. He no longer asks Hamor to speak for him, but addresses his fellow patriarch directly. Asked what he bequeaths the Nations of the Earth, he replies: “My father was a holy man. His story will be my bequest.” He tells the story of Isaac and Rebecca; of “the pious man” Abraham. In the account of the common ancestors there is hope for peace that will heal “the rift between father and son; the rift between God and man; the rift between heart and soul.”

The one not present at the meeting of African Nations, Esau who watches from his mountain hideout, finally speaks: “I had a dream God’s angel came down to build his tent atop my mountain. He said to me: ‘The storm of evil is building.’” As yet, he does not understand his part in defusing this evil and swears hand-to-hand combat and revenge until “the evildoer will kneel and beg for mercy.” Only the intervention of the ancestors can teach him that there is another way. Personal reconciliation becomes a precondition for survival in Africa. And as in much of
modern African Literature the ancestors, the living dead, the intermediaries between God and humans, return to resolve conflicts--even those they themselves instigated--when their descendants reach a final impasse. Libations offered to them--often by the women who welcome them to earthly functions--become a cry for help.

As Jacob finishes his idealistic account of Isaac and Rebecca, Esau speaks: “Liar,” he tells Jacob. “Since the dawn of time, children have been into rift and discord. Father turned his back on me, his eldest son. Mother cut me off, and you are to blame.” And so the story Jacob bequeaths becomes one in which he betrays his elder brother. He is forced to tell Esau’s story and in that telling accepts responsibility for his own part in events which followed his taking of a birthright not his; a birthright that was, ridiculously, sold him in return for lentil soup and that caused Rebecca to cut all ties with Esau and made Isaac disown his older son. The ancestors, Isaac the Holy One and Rebecca his wife, become actors and thus carry co-responsibility for the unfolding tragedy. Unlike in the Biblical narrative, God does not intervene; is not even an active character in Sissoko’s story. Leah recalls God’s Biblical promises; Esau challenges God’s wisdom in creating brothers and demands justice in God’s Name; Jacob reminds God of God’s promises. But we do not hear of God blessing and by implication exonering Jacob’s rather crooked deeds. Jacob, a lonely old man, admits having prayed for reconciliation but “the world has been torn asunder and God no longer hears men.”

Now Jacob and Esau finally face each other in deadly combat as Esau declares God-ordained war on his brother. In the dark night of their souls both brothers face the ancestors. These tell Esau to drop his knife: “Justice is for God alone to will.” It is with the ancestors, not with God and God’s angel that Jacob’s dramatic struggle takes place. Thunder and lightning accompany the encounter with the God who promised: “I will make your descendants as grains of sand,” and whom Jacob now holds to account. Jacob does not want to die. The ancestors tell him to defend himself. He does this not by asking for God’s forgiveness, but for that of his brother Esau. “Oh Lord, I have come to ask for Esau’s forgiveness!” he cries to the storming heavens. The ancestors hold him responsible for abandoning to predators the vine for which when he planted it he chased away nations; they call him to account for his inability to control his family and the consequent unravelling of the society. Dinah, present amongst the ancestors, accuses him of Shechem’s death. Jacob listens, returns the searching look of eyes fixed on him. He no longer shifts the blame to his sons. Jacob learns that we encounter God in encounters with ourselves and with each other; in encounters with the living and the living-dead. “Each devours his neighbor’s flesh. Brother does not spare brother. We devour each other unceasingly,” he hears the voices around him proclaim. Are these the voices of the ancestors who in the “we” identify with their descendants? Or are these his own perceptions? The film gives no answer. Dinah, extricating herself from amongst the ancestors, gives him God’s promise: “I shall never forget you.” Dinah, not God, bestows on Jacob his new name: “Your name is no longer Jacob. You are Israel! For you are strong against God.”

As the ancestors scatter, Dinah stands watch over Jacob who has fallen into a trance at her feet. When Jacob awakes, Esau publicly confirms his new name as the one who has been “strong against God.” “Israel,” Hamor comments, “your name is too heavy for a man to carry.” Dinah, Esau, Hamor – all victims of Jacob’s actions - or lack of action- thus recognize his new identity and with that assign to him his role as religious and secular leader. Conflicts are resolved not through God’s unilateral intervention; but through human interaction, through the willingness of the community both dead and alive to come to terms with its own past and to re-imagine its present. We as human beings belong to one another; it is we who see and name one another - not a God who through naming imposes a hierarchy of favorites. How we see and how we name each other is vital in the creation of peace. As the South African novelist Bessie Head (1974) commented: “the basic error seem[s] [...] to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky,” and thus “man was not holy to man” (p.206).

The Biblical story tells that Jacob “learned that grain rations were available in Egypt.” He sends his sons to buy what is needed (Gen:42). The subsequent meeting and reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers thus occurs either by chance or because God sent Joseph ahead to provide for his family. Nowhere does the Biblical narrative question a God who provides so miraculously for “His own” yet does not intervene in forces that bring about hunger and starvation for others. In La Genese by contrast, the death of all their livestock, the starvation threatening Israel and his sons is ascribed to Esau’s act of vengeance in the final conflict between him and Jacob - an act thwarted at the last minute through ancestral intervention. Yet when his sons protest that through his act of vengeance Esau is responsible for the disaster facing them, Israel confirms his relationships: Esau is his brother; and Dinah is not mad, she is their sister. Esau’s directive “Go to the land of Misraim!” is integral to the reconciliatory process which cannot be completed until Israel’s sons admit the secret they thought no one knew; face the one they betrayed and whose death they
plotted. Esau prophesies: the prince they will meet will free them from their turmoil, “the turmoil of Joseph.” Once again, as in the Council of African Nations, Leah’s ten sons are called to account; have to face the truth others know about them because, as Esau tells them: “nothing escapes the desert hunters.” They are still arrogantly defiant despite the lessons taught them at the Council. Yet, although Esau knows their sin, and even Jacob/Israel must by now have stopped denying what he was not willing to face when he sat in his tent mourning, they are not hauled before a court of law. Jacob defers to Esau and likewise sends them to Misraim. They are once more given an opportunity to redeem themselves; they are not condemned but guided to a reconciliation which will eventually bring peace to Jacob. On the success of their quest depends the fate of their family, their clan, and the surrounding nations.

Dinah joins Esau in sending her brothers to Misraim. She speaks of a prince in Egypt, “as handsome as Shechem [her] husband” who will help them. By mentioning Shechem’s similarity to the prince they will meet, she clearly places responsibility for both Joseph’s and Shechem’s fates on her brothers’ shoulders. Yet she does not ask for them to be prosecuted. Dinah’s attitude reflects a vital element in the African understanding of Ubuntu; of peace and reconciliation. Through her forgiveness Dinah chooses not to exact revenge from her brothers. The man she loved remains dead, brutally murdered. She will never be given what we in Western legal systems call justice. Her brothers persist in calling her mad. Yet, she gives her forgiveness without being asked. And in doing so offers them re-integration into the society. Through her forgiveness she is instrumental in helping heal rifts that have torn her family, her nation, other nations, and the earth apart.

4. Conclusion

“Go to Misraim.” If we remember the current conflict surrounding Egypt and Israel, the film’s ending is particularly poignant. Furthermore, the directive comes from the society’s elders, not from God. In the American English version of the film the narrator tells us that Jacob / Israel will eventually go to Egypt. In the original Bambara the only promise given is that they have the possibility of finding reconciliation with their own past and with their society which includes the living and the dead. Sissoko’s message is clear: Conflict is resolved through human interaction; through taking responsibility; through speaking and acknowledging one’s own and others’ truth. We belong to one another. Together with the ancestors we are guarantors of each other’s survival — something that can only happen when inter-personal issues, not only problems, are taken care of.

In deferring to his elder brother and by sending his sons to Misraim, Jacob / Israel finally takes control of his family and thus creates possibilities for real peace. In this healing of human conflict is the promise of the healing of the earth. As he watches his sons leave for Egypt, Israel with Dinah at his side, has at last left the tent in which he hid and abdicated all responsibility whilst his sons wrought havoc on the world. Now he stands in the sun, between Hamor and Esau. All three will soon be ancestors. The hope for peace is that their guidance of their descendants will bear the fruit of the lessons they themselves have learned. Mali is a long way from Egypt. We do not know how the story ends; whether the ten sons of Leah ever arrive, or whether they make peace with their brother. This too is part of the approach taken in the African Literary Tradition: the story’s ending is left to the listeners’ imagination. It is after all their ending; they and not the storyteller will determine its outcome. Unlike in the Scriptures we inherited, there are no certainties. The story’s further development depends on our leaders and on each of us being willing to face ourselves and our relationships with those to whom we are connected at the very least through our common humanity. The storyteller has reminded us of who we are; has helped us see today in the light of stories of the past. How today’s story ends becomes a personal and societal choice.

Bishop Tutu tells us: in forgiveness “I am abandoning my right to revenge, to pay back. [...] By the fact that you have abused me [...] you have given me a certain right over you; [...] When I forgive I say I jettison that right [to retribution], and I open the door of opportunity to you to make a new beginning. [...] I want to work towards the possibility of restoring the relationship.” To perpetrators Tutu says: “The only way you can appropriate forgiveness is by confessing. That opens you to the possibility of receiving forgiveness.” For Tutu, as in La Genese this confession is to one another, rather than to God.

Israel’s sons leave for Misraim, watched by the elders and by Dinah. We have no idea whether they will accept the restoration Dinah has offered; or the forgiveness the Biblical story tells us Joseph offers. The journey to Egypt is a long one. They will have time to think, to talk, to decide. Sissoko’s film tells us they learned little at the Council of African Nations. Africa’s future depends on their decision once they reach Egypt and meet Joseph, and acknowledge what they have done to him, to Dinah and her Shechem; and in this to themselves and to the other nations of Africa.

References


