

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



BANEL & ADAMA
(Language: Pular, Peul)

Director: Ramata-Toulaye Sy

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 87 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 8 February 2025

“Most disaster movies announce themselves with vast tsunamis, spewing volcanoes or cow-flinging twisters. In Senegalese writer-director Ramata-Toulaye Sy’s tough but tender debut, balance with the natural world falls out of kilter in smaller increments – and with it, a love affair and a whole community.

Set in a tight-knit village in rural Senegal that’s baking dangerously in the 50 degree heat, *Banel & Adama* follows two star-crossed lovers. The fierce-spirited Banel (Khady Mane) and the mellower Adama (Mamadou Diallo) have been brought together by the death of her first husband. Their arranged marriage, fast-tracked by Adama’s status as chief-in-waiting and the community’s need for him to produce an heir, might have produced a loveless union. Instead, the pair are inseparable, spending their spare time excavating an old sand-covered abode as a new home for themselves beyond the village. Their plan, coupled with Adama’s refusal of the chieftom, hit like an earthquake in their traditional community.

From sombre Islamic prayers to café-touba-fuelled socialising, *Banel & Adama* is stitched beautifully together from the fabric of rural Senegalese traditions. But just as Banel’s bright, more modern-feeling clothes offer dazzling bursts of colour in cinematographer Amine Berrada’s washed-out palette, the couple’s quest for emancipation is too confronting for their fellow villagers. The village elders – and fuelled by jealousy, some of the younger ones – are soon blaming them for the growing pile of dead cows lying in their bone-dry fields. ‘You cannot go against your destiny,’ asserts Banel. Going against centuries’ old traditions and superstitions feels just as impossible, though.

Banel & Adama makes powerful use of the drought as a *deus ex machina* to pull at the threads of their bond, and their community, in sorrowful ways. The two leads, both first-time actors, are excellent: Diallo as the hopeful but increasingly fatalistic Adama; and especially Mane as the abrasive, sometimes self-defeatingly blunt, but determined and dreamy Banel, the kind of unashamedly ‘difficult’ female character cinema could use a lot more of.

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



The camera clings increasingly tightly to her as Banel slowly senses that her destiny isn't what she'd hoped it would be. Those haunting close-ups stay with you in a powerful love story with a bruised heart.”

Phil de Semlyen, *Time Out*, Friday 15 March 2024

“In *Banel & Adama*, writer-director Ramata-Toulaye Sy expresses the delirium that comes with love and the downfall that's doomed to follow it. This fable-like film about ephemeral bliss takes shape in a remote village in Senegal, where gender expectations are particularly pronounced. Crucial to the story isn't only the expiration date that comes with feverish infatuation and society's disciplinary powers, but the lack of synchrony between lovers—that is, when one lover's allegiance to the relationship never seems to last as long as the other's.

Per local tradition, Banel (Khady Mane) marries her deceased husband's younger brother, Adama (Mamadou Diallo). If she's to be left in peace, Banel is expected to excel as a wife. Which means doing the laundry, always sitting gracefully, working alongside the other women, and getting pregnant before her mother-in-law (Binta Racine Sy) threatens to find Adama a second wife. Banel wants none of that. Instead, she yearns for herding cattle with Adama by her side and leading a romantic life away from the muffling orthodoxy of the village.

The dynamic between Banel and Adama initially recalls that of Haider and his wife in Saim Sadiq's *Joyland*, as both couples manage to forge a cocoon of bliss away from the soul-crushing pressures of family and society. It's a miraculous but frail arrangement. And in both films, only one of the lovers is willing to go against all odds without giving in to cowardice.

Banel, like Haider's wife in *Joyland*, embodies the figure of the so-called feminist killjoy, whose commitment to her own desires is an unbearable affront to a community impervious to the singularity of its people. But while Sadiq's sublime film unfolds unpredictably, and with a nuanced attention to character psychology, *Banel & Adama* is too insistent on the foreseeable elements of a parable. For one, the characters here suggest archetypes headed toward tragedy as their affection disrupts the village's naturalized misogyny.

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



But this approach has its rewards. These are brief, memorable sequences that play like vignettes. As when Banel, a feisty young woman prone to daydreaming, sits however she wants behind a translucent sheet, suffering alone and bathing in the nocturnal blue light. Or when Adama walks on the crackling land, which echoes the drought-cursed ground of Nelson Pereira dos Santos's cinema novo classic *Vidas Secas*, and is inexplicably attacked by a swarm of black birds. And when Banel confronts Adama about his change of heart with the gut-wrenchingly economical words: "You promised me." To which he responds with even fewer: "I know."

The ultimate tragedy here is revealed to be Adama's lack of loyalty to love, which eventually leaves Banel to her own devices, digging for what was supposed to be a joint project all by herself. Sy captures this descent into a rather common feminine position—that of the desperate dupe—through a sparse usage of sound and careful images. In the end, *Banel & Adama* is most memorable when it forgets to push the story forward and wallows in the painterly, or allegorical, registers of its images. In these moments we see indications of a film that could have been—one more dedicated to the sensations of feminine abandonment than to the demands of a story.

Diego Semerene, *Slant*, June 3, 2024

"Franco-Senegalese director Ramata-Toulaye Sy made an accomplished feature debut in the Cannes competition – the only first-timer on the list – and while it is flawed, this film finds an assured place in the quietist tradition of African cinema with beautiful images and strong moments, and with relevant things to say about community, a woman's place and the climate crisis.

Banel (Khady Mane) and Adama (Mamadou Diallo) are two young people in a Senegalese village who appear to be very much in love: dreamily, moonily, utterly infatuated with each other. Banel writes their linked names "Banel e Adama" over and over again in a notebook like a lovestruck schoolkid. They dream of living together in an abandoned house which is at present buried by a recent sandstorm.

But should we fear that this is a tale of star-crossed love? Will the village forbid their wedding? Not exactly. They are in fact a married couple, yet things are complicated. They have been in love since their early teens, but Banel was forced to marry Adama's older brother Yero, who was the tribal chief. When

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



Yero died, Adama's subsequent offer to marry the now widowed Banel was welcomed by the tribal elders as an admirable act of piety and honour. So things have (supposedly) worked out fine, though both have the uneasy feeling that their happiness is founded on dishonesty and disloyalty to Yero's memory.

But now the community is outraged by Adama's refusal to accept the position of tribal chief – he wants only to live away from the village with Banel in this soon-to-be-dug-up house – and Banel infuriates her mother by not getting pregnant and having no interest in motherhood. Their dual obstinacy assumes a more dramatic aspect as a drought strikes the village, and weeks and months go by without rain, a calamity which the community unhesitatingly blames on Banel, as the troublesome woman.

Sy and Mane show that Banel is not a simperingly demure Juliet figure: she is fierce and pugnacious with a violent streak. She likes killing things with stones flung from a catapult, and when she uses this weapon to kill a songbird there was a gasp of disbelief from the audience I was in. Wonderfully photographed and vehemently acted, the film is full of ideas that might perhaps go in a short film; it does not really deliver a narrative final act, unless it is to suggest a weary yet defiant submission to misogynist forces that are blaming Banel for things that are not her fault. Nonetheless, this is an impressive piece of work from a natural film-maker.”

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2023