

Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the “Woman Who Was More Than a Man”

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Theology plays a role in how we think about human agency for social change. One's conception of God's relationship to humanity, or lack thereof, can suppress or empower resistance to oppressive systems. The prophetic revolutionary fighter Aline Sitoé Diatta¹ remains an inspirational symbol of resistance, not only for the Diola people of Senegal but also more broadly throughout West Africa.² As “La femme qui était plus qu'un homme”—the woman who was more than a man—her legendary impact on subsequent generations offers the opportunity to investigate the empowering influence of the Diola³ indigenous faith tradition, *awasena path*, on moral and ethical formation. Employing the womanist theological ethics of Katie G. Cannon and Delores Williams, along with the quare theory of E. Patrick Johnson, this paper theorizes an *ethic of resistance* and an *ethic of control*. The paper will then explore Diatta's use of both ethics based on an analysis of an African short film, *À La Recherche Aline*. Diatta's embodiment of an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control within modern reenactments of her story depict her rebellion against colonialism as empowered by the *awasena path* and its theology. The film reflects a modern reception history of Diatta that continues to inspire those of African descent to defend against attacks on their personhood by white supremacy.

KEYWORDS

ethic of resistance, ethic of control, womanist theological ethics, quare theory, Aline Sitoé Diatta, lived theology

¹ Also known as Alinesitoué Diatta.

² Tijan M. Sallah, “Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia: A Question in Search of a Literature,” in *Routledge Handbook of Minority Discourses in African Literature*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), 96, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429354229-9>; Robert M. Baum, *West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2015), 145–46.

³ Also known as Jola or Ajamat.

Diola Awasena Path as Lived Religion and its Oral History of Women’s Prophetic Empowerment

In *West Africa’s Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition*, Baum makes a significant contribution to Africana religion by conducting detailed ethnographic research and oral history, uncovering the importance of women within the Diola faith tradition, *awasena path*. The book is about a small community in West Africa and follows a woman prophet, Alinesitoué Diatta, also known as Aline Sitoë Diatta, who is empowered by a persisting prophetic tradition. As Dianna Bell points out, the book vividly demonstrates how colonialism impacted a particular West African community and how religion worked as an agent of social change. Moreover, it expands on gendered discourses within the study of Africana religious leadership.⁴ Given the book’s focus on how the Diola navigated multiple cultures, it is similarly applicable to studying how the African diaspora was impacted by the Transatlantic Slave Trade. *West Africa’s Women of God* examines how African indigenous faith traditions, especially the *awasena path*, protected communal identities from the external ideologies of Christian proselytization and surrounding Islamic influence during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Baum notes that within the study of traditional African religions, most Western scholars view the term “religion” as “an institutionally and conceptually distinct category of analysis,” regardless of the absence of an equivalent term or concept in African language.⁵ In building relationships within the township of Kadjinol in Ziguinchor, Senegal, Baum discerns that for this Diola community, religion provided a more dynamic perspective on life rather than a stagnant one.⁶ Four words within the Diola’s various dialects—*makanye*, *boutine*, *kainoe*, and *huasene*—reveal the danger of any religious study that solely relies on analyzing colonialist texts.⁷ The word *Makanye*, translates to “what we do,” and represents what the Diola

⁴ Dianna Bell, “Introduction to Roundtable Commentary for West Africa’s Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 1 (2018): 125.

⁵ Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

understand as their customs or traditions.⁸ *Boutine*, or “path,” identifies particular religious traditions within ethnic groups.⁹ For example, the Diola community in Kadjinol refer to Christianity as a “European path” and Islam as a “Mandinka path”.¹⁰ *Kainoe*, or “thought”, refers to ideas about humanity, nature, animals, and their collective relationship with a supreme being and other spirits.¹¹ Finally, *huasene* refers to rituals that tangibly combine the *awasena* path tradition and Diola *kainoe* into a communal experience.¹² Baum understands religion within the framework of *makanye*, *boutine*, *kainoe*, and *huasene*.

In contrast to constrictive definitions of religion, Baum’s scholarship focuses on studying *lived* religion, acknowledging indigenous believers’ and practitioners’ lives and practices as primary sources.¹³ Similarly, I consider the term “theology” within the frame of the *kainoe*. Theology, in the context of this paper, represents the ideologies of supreme beings and spirits, and their relationship with humanity, nature, animals, and creation. When differentiating between lived religion and lived theology, Charles Marsh finds that while both methods examine practices, beliefs, and objects of religion, the goals of such examination diverge. On the one hand, the field of lived religion analyzes religious practices, beliefs, and objects to discern and “understand more clearly the human phenomenon of religion” in historical and social contexts.¹⁴ Lived theology, on the other hand, examines these aspects to understand religious believers’ epistemology of supreme beings or spirits in their daily lives.¹⁵

The dissonance between defining religion has led to a lingering debate on the importance of African supreme beings within African traditional

⁸ Ibid, 29.

⁹ Ibid, 29.

¹⁰ Ibid, 29–30.

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

¹² Ibid, 30.

¹³ Ibid, 29.

¹⁴ Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds., *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁵ Marsh, Slade, and Azaransky, 7.

religions.¹⁶ Were they an original concept within such traditions, or did these supreme beings arise from exterior religious influence, like Christianity or Islam? Due to the limited contact between Europeans and Diola, Baum challenges the latter by highlighting the presence of the Diola supreme being, known as Ata-Emit or Emitai, before the 17th century.¹⁷

Emitai and Ethics

Diola elders describe Emitai as the all-knowing creator of the world and the source of knowledge for Diola survival in the southern Casamance.¹⁸ This supreme being provided rain and practical knowledge of rice cultivation that was vital for both the local economy and sustenance during times of drought.¹⁹ Emitai was also a judicial presence that established the Diola ethical system, helping the community to discern between mere rudeness and heinous acts, *gnigne*.²⁰ Followers of the *awasena* path believed they were accountable to Emitai.²¹ According to the Diola community, Emitai allowed people to see and communicate with spirits, permitting souls to travel during the night.²² Emitai also chose a select few to be messengers, *Emitai dabognol* or “whom Emitai had sent.”²³ These messengers communicated practical strategies and wisdom to the Diola people on behalf of Emitai during times of uncertainty.²⁴ Baum has in mind *Emitai dabognol* when defining the term “prophet” within his work.²⁵

During the colonial era, Diola prophets were similar to the prophets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in two ways. First, *Emitai dabognols* would claim that their God, Emitai, spoke with them directly. Second, Emitai commanded them to share God’s guidance with the Diola people and their

¹⁶ Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid*, 33.

²² *Ibid*, 33.

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

neighboring communities.²⁶ Emitai's role in protecting against drought explains the importance of this supreme being and the role of women within the tradition. For example, although women could not become priestesses in the *awasena* path tradition, they could participate in *Nyakul Emit*, the funeral dance for Emitai, during a drought.²⁷ This dance obligated Diola men of the community to perform rituals at *all* Diola spirit shrines, including shrines of circumcised males and the priest-king, when the regular rituals had failed to produce rain.²⁸ As such, Emitai permitted women to advocate for the Diola community. Eventually, excessive drought conditions and the colonial pressures of war and economic exploitation weakened the perceived effectiveness of contemporary male prophets.²⁹ These converging forces left space for female prophets to step in to aid in the healing of their land and community.³⁰

The *awasena* path's oral history of prophetic tradition and its empowerment of African women offers an excellent example of religious dynamism in the face of uncertainty sparked by the realities of colonialism.³¹ The implications of the religion's ethical and moral formation for resistance amid oppression are worth further exploration, especially in the African diasporic fight against white supremacy. In the following sections, I will discuss two theories, one of an ethic of resistance and of an ethic of control. Finally, highlighting the influence of *awasena* theology on Diatta's moral and ethical actions, I exegete reenactments of Diatta's story from the African short film, *À la recherche Aline*.

Theorizing an Ethic of Resistance and an Ethic of Control

A Clarification of Terms and Positionality

As a theoretical foundation, I will discuss how I use the terms "ethics", "moral agent", "morality", "ethic", and "virtue". For this paper, the term "ethics" refers to moral principles—standards of right, wrong, good, and evil that an

²⁶ Ibid, 5.

²⁷ Ibid, 62.

²⁸ Ibid, 62.

²⁹ Ibid, 60.

³⁰ Bell, "Introduction to Roundtable Commentary for West Africa's Women of God," 124; Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 60.

³¹ See specifically Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, chaps. 4 & 5.

individual possesses—that govern an individual’s behavior and activity in a society. A “moral agent” refers to any individual who makes decisions regarding right, wrong, good, or evil. The “morality” from which these moral principles arise is a system of normative rules that an individual believes they should follow to live a good and meaningful life. In the academic field of Ethics,³² two types of morality are often debated: the universal and the conventional. Universal morality assumes that a set of principles are true for all people, regardless of their culture or society, i.e. natural law theory.³³ Conventional morality refers to a set of norms and values within a particular group of people or society.³⁴ Ethicist John Deigh explains the complexity of conventional morality:

As is all too common, sometimes these beliefs rest on superstitions and prejudices, and sometimes the corresponding customs and practices promote cruelty and inflict indignity. It can happen then that a person comes to recognize such facts about some of the norms belonging to his society’s conventional morality and, though observance of these norms has become second nature in him, to conclude nonetheless that he ought to reject them. Implicit in this conclusion is a realization that one has to look beyond the conventional morality of one’s society to determine what ends to pursue in life and what it is right to do in the conduct of life.³⁵

Within the frame of conventional morality, one’s social location and self-defined community matter in determining what is right, wrong, good, or evil for an individual. Diversity within one’s self-defined community can help one’s sense of morality become more expansive. For example, if someone considers members of other ethnic groups outside of their own as part of their community, intersectionality may shift the morality of that individual to reflect their membership amongst a variety of groups. The individual may

³² I capitalize “Ethics” to differentiate between the term “ethics” and the academic field of Ethics.

³³ John Deigh, ed., “What Is Ethics?,” in *An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511750519.002>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

seek to integrate norms from the various groups they connect with, rejecting some norms from one society and incorporating norms from another to weave a coherent morality for themselves. Given the focus of this paper on the ethnographic analysis of particular groups of people, I situate the terms “ethics” and “ethic” within the framework of conventional morality rather than a universal one.

I use the term “ethic” to denote a system or framework of moral principles that pertain to a specific behavior or conduct. I will, henceforth, refer to multiple systems of moral principles pertaining to a specific behavior as ethic(s) to differentiate from the term “ethics”. As I describe these ethic(s), I present them as an ethic³⁶ engaged within a particular community or individual rather than alluding to a universal ethic shared by all without nuance. I argue that it is possible for an ethic to operate within a spectrum pertaining to the behavior in question. An ethic can be a low ethic, holding the behavior loosely, a high ethic, holding the behavior tightly as a focus, or even somewhere in between.

The term “ethical”, then, indicates anything that refers to the moral principles of an individual within the norms of their society or group. Here, ethical is not used as a term representing universal moral correctness; rather, it is a general reference to the normative moral principles of an individual within the norms of their society or group. In contrast, “virtue” assumes a moral correctness towards a common good within a particular society or group.

I use “virtue” as a term to represent a socially constructed, ultimate, moral good for a given society or group. Compared to “ethic”, every virtue is inherently an ethic that pertains to a laudable behavior or conduct in a society, but not every ethic is a virtue. The difference is that a virtue is an ethic that is ranked as imperative to living a good life within a society.³⁷ My use of the term “virtue” aligns with virtue ethicist Nancy Snow’s view of virtue as social intelligence. She explains that if social intelligence is a collection of cognitive-affective processes that help people live life with others, virtues are a form of social intelligence that help people achieve a subset of social living:

³⁶ I purposely use the phrase “an ethic of” rather than “the ethic of.”

³⁷ Again, within the frame of conventional morality, what is determined as *good* depends on the norms of the given society or group in question.

a good life.³⁸ Humans are social beings that construct meaning by interacting with the world around us. Thus, our objectivity and interpretations are built on subjective encounters and noting consistent patterns within them. We correct our actions and character dispositions based on feedback from our surroundings: its affirmations, silences, or disapprovals.³⁹ Virtue, then, represents an ethic that has been affirmed and reified as an ultimate good within a society.

As I theorize an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, it is important to acknowledge that I do so from my social location as a quare⁴⁰ African American woman living in the United States. While my Diola ancestors had different life experiences than my own in modern-day America, I believe that theorizing from a diasporic lens may reveal ethical frameworks that have been passed along generationally before and after the Transatlantic Slave Trade; ethical frameworks that continue to evolve in today’s world.

An Ethic of Resistance

In her groundbreaking work, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie G. Cannon reveals the inefficiency of dominant Western discourses in theological ethics to address the ethical frameworks that pertain to African American women. Dominant Western narratives in this field favor a universal morality that assumes that valid moral agents possess both freedom and self-directed, self-determined power,⁴¹ suggesting that moral agents have the freedom

³⁸ Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 85.

³⁹ Snow, 90.

⁴⁰ Though the term *quare*, coined by E. Patrick Johnson, can be used as both a noun and adjective, in this paper, *quare* represents members of the LGBTQIA+ community who also identify as non-white individuals. Quare theory brings to the fore the epistemologies of LGBTQ people of color, much like womanism centers the epistemologies of women of color. Similarly, quare theory acknowledges the importance of intersectionality. Johnson’s etymology of the word quare builds on and mimics Alice Walker’s four-part definition of womanism. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 127, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/monograph/book/69514>.

⁴¹ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series 60 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1988), 2–3.

and power to choose whether to suffer and voluntarily “carry [one’s] cross”.⁴² By such notions, the subjugation of African American women by chattel slavery and the multidimensional oppressions of race, sex, and class render an ethical framework for African American women not only invisible but intrinsically immoral;⁴³ an advantageous foundation for white supremacy. Within this narrative, African American women do not have the same agency to choose responsible action within the dominant ethical framework, which Sharon Welch names an ethic of control. Instead, Cannon’s ethical framework for African American women resembles more of an ethic of resistance, cultivated within the backdrop of multidimensional struggle.⁴⁴

Ethic of resistance	Ethic of control
A system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in ways that sustain and defend the personhood of a moral agent and/or the humanity of its self-defined community against perceived dehumanization.	A system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in such a way that sustains or expands the power and/or status of a moral agent and its self-defined community.

Following the above definition, an ethic of resistance then seeks to resist attacks on human dignity. This definition is developed from Katie G. Cannon’s and Delores Williams’s⁴⁵ accounts of resistance and survival within Black women’s lives and literary traditions, along with E. Patrick Johnson’s explication of quare theory—a theory by and for queer⁴⁶ people of color.⁴⁷ A recurring theme that arises throughout each of these works,

⁴² Cannon, 3.

⁴³ Cannon, 2.

⁴⁴ See Cannon’s descriptions of Zora Neale Hurston’s resistance in Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

⁴⁵ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴⁶ I use the term *queer* in this paper to represent the spectrum of members within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. The term also encompasses other sexual and/or gender identities not encompassed within its acronym letters (+).

⁴⁷ I use the terms *people of color* and *communities of color* as umbrella terms that denote those who identify as non-White in the United States.]

along with my own lived experience, is the defense of one’s sense of physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual personhood in a world that seeks to deny or destroy it. Behind these resistance and endurance strategies is the constant struggle to claim innate human dignity and worth. Williams explicitly names a “doctrine of resistance” that is passed down from enslaved mothers to their children. She recalls:

[a]n ex-slave woman told of the doctrine of resistance passed on to her by her slave mother, who refused to be whipped by slave owners. The daughter claimed that with all her ability to work, she [the enslaved mother] did not make a good slave. She was too high spirited and independent. The one doctrine of my mother’s teaching which was branded upon my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me.⁴⁸

Abuse, whether intentional or unintentional, is an attack on personhood as it dehumanizes a subject into that of an object to be used or discarded. This slave mother knew she could work but refused to do so under abusive conditions that denied her a sense of humanity or personal worth. Thus, her fight and teachings reflect an ethic of resistance that values the defense of personhood, rebelling against the status quo, regardless of the risk. Systems of enslavement born in the ancient world continue today in evolved forms, whether physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional, perpetuating the abuse of human beings. Generational teaching of a doctrine of resistance has credence on moral principles that shape one’s actions towards the betterment of the community. In Williams’ example, the mother holds a set of moral principles that value human dignity and communal health as a good. Thus, being a “good slave” in the society the mother lives within is rendered immoral as it enables the dehumanization of herself and her community. The mother rebels accordingly through her actions of refusal and the dissemination of her knowledge to her children.

Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson views queer theory as a “theory in the flesh” that merges both theory and practice through an “embodied politic of resistance”.⁴⁹ This politic manifests in the common traditions of

⁴⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 137.

⁴⁹ Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 127.

performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art, emphasizing experiential diversity within LGBTQAI+⁵⁰ communities of color. It seeks to narrow the gap between the disparity of theory and practice within queer studies, rooting epistemology in the body. It “necessarily engenders identity politics” in a way that “acknowledges difference within and between particular groups”.⁵¹ As Johnson explains:

identity politics does not necessarily mean the reduction of multiple identities into a monolithic identity or narrow cultural nationalism. Rather, quare studies moves beyond simply theorizing subjectivity and agency as discursively mediated to theorizing how that mediation may propel material bodies into action.⁵²

Borrowing from quare theory, within my theory of an ethic of resistance, the unique way an individual or group defines their personhood shapes their moral and ethical actions. It can manifest itself not only in political action but also in the performance of rituals, art, and cultural storytelling. For example, as African poet Tijan Sallah explains, proverbs are used to teach moral principles and life lessons in Diola cultures.⁵³ One Diola proverb that points to an ethic of resistance is “Busanay bati Abantan o kone, inayool api manaiko mapinco banomer”, or “They say that his mother always put him in danger, for prettiness is bought with a heifer”. Sallah explains that this proverb criticizes the practice of a “bride price for women” that reduces the value of a woman’s personhood to her physical appearance in lieu of valuing the discernment of common values or shared goals in life between a bride and suitor.⁵⁴ These egalitarian notions were also embodied by Diatta through symbolism and oral tradition. In the rites of Houssahara—one of Diatta’s spirit shrines—and in various songs about her, Diatta wields a spear during funeral rituals, a tool typically associated with men in Diola culture.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ At the time of Johnson’s conception of quare theory, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities were at forefront of sexual and gender expression; however, I have referenced LGBTQAI+ here to more fully represent the movement in scholarship in sexuality and gender expression.

⁵¹ Ibid, 135.

⁵² Ibid, 135.

⁵³ Sallah, “Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia,” 100.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 100.

⁵⁵ Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 161.

Similarly, another song describes her as “a strong woman, courageous, [and] brave like an elephant”.⁵⁶ The Diola typically held elephant symbolism almost exclusively for men who exuded strength, courage and bravery.⁵⁷ Diatta’s ritual performance and songs about her, thus, defend against the denigration of women’s personhood.

An Ethic of Control

I define an ethic of control as a system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in such a way that sustains or expands the power and/or status of the moral agent and its self-defined community. Thus, an ethic of control seeks to control one’s power and/or status in a society. This definition offers nuance to feminist ethicist Sharon Welch’s own description in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*,⁵⁸ along with descriptions of dominant Western ethical frameworks from *Black Womanist Ethics*⁵⁹ and *Sisters in the Wilderness*.⁶⁰ For example, according to Welch, one notable aspect of an ethic of control within privileged white communities is that their conception of responsible action is predicated on an “intrinsically immoral balance of power”, favoring the moral agent.⁶¹ Thus, an ideology of supremacy is intrinsic within this high ethic of control. Furthermore, this inequitable balance of power enables the moral agent to assume that one can guarantee their actions are efficacious. As such, when complex problems arise, the moral agent is more likely to suffer from a “striking paralysis of will”.⁶² Welch discerns this complicity towards the status quo to be the plight of white feminists in addressing systemic injustice.

When evaluating the role of personhood within such a framework, it can be detrimental when personhood is conflated with power and status. In societies where wealth accumulation is considered a societal power, poor communities are deemed to have less worth—personhood—as they do not

⁵⁶ Ibid, 161.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 162.

⁵⁸ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 14 and 17.

⁵⁹ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 2–3.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 85.

⁶¹ Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 17.

⁶² Ibid, 17.

possess equal power or freedom. Worth, then, is synonymous with material wealth production. Similarly, those with less education may also be perceived to have lesser worth as education often correlates to higher economic status. The conflation of power and status with personhood is reminiscent of the dominant Western discourse of ethics that Cannon fought against in the Academy. I assert that a high ethic of control that conflates power and status with personhood exists as a dominant ethic within the ethos of a colonizer that uses ideologies of supremacy to support its domination. For example, David Chidester notes that the subjugation of indigenous African peoples was necessary for the successful propagation of supremacist histories of religion. This subjugation deemed African religious traditions as “primitive”, “barbaric”, and “savage”, legitimizing in the eyes of the colonizer the domination of indigenous peoples.⁶³ This notion is similar to that of Jonathan Tran’s domination-exploitation-justification feedback loop that undergirds the cycle of use-identity-justification within racial capitalism.⁶⁴ Such a high ethic of control has the danger of becoming a virtue within a supremacist society.

However, a positive example of an ethic of control can be found within social justice movements that value equity across multiple social groups. For those occupying lesser social positions in a society, fighting to elevate one’s status to be equal to those in higher social locations would also indicate an ethic of control. For example, from the late 1820s to 1851, trading treaties were fairly diplomatic, albeit still tense, between French officials and Diola townships of the Lower Casamance area without military force.⁶⁵ However, after the French began excluding other Europeans from the area and forced their sovereignty upon the area, armed rebellions from Diola townships started to occur.⁶⁶ When taxes were levied, and particular crops were imposed by the French to expand their power and status inequitably, the Diola sought to fight back by withholding those taxes and refusing to incorporate peanuts and cotton as cash crops.⁶⁷ Within an ethic of control, the Diola people sought to

⁶³ David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), xii–xiii, xix–xx.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Tran, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 74–75.

⁶⁵ Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 65–66.

⁶⁶ Baum, 66.

⁶⁷ Baum, 66.

maintain their own sovereignty and power against those who wished to take it from them in political ways. In the narrative of the Diola’s revolutionary prophet, Aline Sitoë Diatta, we find examples of attempts to shift political and social imbalances towards equity—an ethic of control. We also find a defense of both individual and communal personhood—an ethic of resistance. However, there is significance in who defines this precious personhood for Diatta—the supreme being Emitai.

Exegeting Lived Theology from *À La Recherche Aline* and its Connection to an Ethic of Resistance and an Ethic of Control

My mother told me that she was a woman who dared to stand up to the whites to protect the crops. And for a Diola, that’s something. She went where no man dared to go. She did what no man dared to do. That’s why I respect her.⁶⁸

Nga Nga Rokhaya Bayo, age 24.

*Diola actress who plays Aline Sitoë Diatta in *À La Recherche Aline**

Given the richness of oral tradition and religious ritual within Diola culture in lieu of written literature,⁶⁹ narrative reenactments of Diatta’s story can serve as a text to exegete her theology through oral and visual reception history.⁷⁰ In this spirit, I will briefly interpret a general narrative of Diatta’s life within the short film *À la recherche Aline*. The reenactments of Diatta’s story by local Diola people in Senegal give us a glimpse of the reception history that continues to mobilize collective resistance against white supremacy.

Narratives from the Film

In 2020, a short film was released by student filmmaker Rokhaya Marieme Balde, who had returned to her home country of Senegal to create a film about her ancestor and great-great-aunt, Aline Sitoë Diatta.⁷¹ *À La*

⁶⁸ *À La Recherche Aline*, Short, Biography (HEAD - Genève, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p0crc8x5/the-supernatural-powers-of-the-african-joan-of-arc>.

⁶⁹ Sallah, “Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia,” 95.

⁷⁰ Reception history reflects how a particular audience receives a text or story in their own cultural context.

⁷¹ *Seeking Aline*.

Recherche Aline (Seeking Aline) not only presents a visual dramatization of Aline's story, but also chronicles Balde's research interviews with locals about Aline. To offer examples of an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control operative within Diatta's narrative and her lived theology, I draw attention to two particular reenactments: Diatta's call from Emitai and Diatta confronting her people on resisting French taxation.

Diatta's Call

The film opens with a cinematic view of Aline Sitoé, a golden crown on her head where she is beckoned by Emitai to the middle of a sandy beach at night: "Don't be afraid, it is God talking to you".⁷² At first, Emitai manifests through a distorted masculine voice, appearing as three men covered in gold and adorned with larger golden crowns. Emitai tells Aline, "I am sending you to your people".⁷³ Emitai tells Aline to inform her people that Emitai is unhappy and that they are to "rise up".⁷⁴ Aline is to be Emitai's messenger. She attempts to refuse several times, saying, "Forgive me, I cannot", only to find herself being driven back by Emitai to the crashing waves behind her.⁷⁵ Emitai tells her that she cannot refuse and must give the message: "Only you can do it. You can't refuse".⁷⁶ She awakes in her bed, startled by this dream.

This reenactment of Aline's dream reflects how those on the *awasena* path believe Emitai interacts with human existence. We get a glimpse of how the aforementioned soul travel may have been portrayed in previous generations. Corroborating other ethnographic accounts like Baum's, the scene reveals that this supreme being can bless people but may also be unhappy about the collective acceptance of injustice. In this case, Emitai is asking for the Diola people to rise up and resist the French colonizers. Emitai gives Aline, a young woman, the authority to become Emitai's messenger. She is sent to her people to share both the unhappiness of Emitai and empower them to rise up against oppressive forces. Emitai's empowerment reflects an ethic of resistance as it encourages the defense of personhood, dignity, and the worth of a collective people towards human equity. At the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

same time, Diatta cannot refuse Emitai’s call to help her people, revealing the power dynamics between the supreme deity and human beings. Emitai uses coercive power by forcing Diatta towards rising waves as she attempts to refuse. Consequently, Diatta must honor both the status of Emitai as more powerful and defend against the loss of power for her people, reflecting an ethic of control.

Resisting Colonial Capitalism

In another pivotal reenactment in the film that depicts both an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, Diatta stands up against the male elders of the village who wish to concede to French taxation and crop propagation. Before this scene, Aline had started her prophetic journey by boldly ordering female rice producers to stop spreading rice and pray for rain. She tells them that they must listen to her because Emitai sent her. Through much perseverance, she eventually succeeds in convincing the producers to perform the rain ritual with her. The next scene, however, starts with three male Diola elders standing before their community who are seated on the ground in front of them. An elder shares:

The white men came. He wants to tax us. We must give them rice, but we don’t have enough to feed our families. So, he wants us to grow groundnut. Let’s grow groundnut. That way, we’ll have enough to pay the tax and feed our families. If we don’t cooperate, things will be hard. We must grow groundnut because rice alone will not be enough to pay all the taxes the whites are imposing on us. That’s why I order that we grow groundnut. That way, we’ll be freed from this burden. So, let’s grow groundnut.⁷⁷

Aline bursts from her seat, jumping up to confront the elders, exclaiming that they must not grow groundnut (peanuts). Diatta’s outburst shocks all the bystanders. Moreover, she stands in front of the elders in an attempt to block them. She faces the community and tells them, “No one will grow groundnut; we’ll just grow rice”.⁷⁸ The crowd jeers, asking “Who are you?”.⁷⁹ Aline replies, “It’s not up to you”, referring to who has the authority to determine

⁷⁷ *Seeking Aline*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

what they will produce as a community for food.⁸⁰ The crowd offers mixed responses, with some saying, “She is too young”, while others wish to hear her speak.⁸¹ As some villagers attempt to seize her, she falls to her knees, performing the rain ritual shown at the beginning of the film, pushing away from those who wish to keep her bound. A young girl joins in, singing the ritualistic song, and soon, the entire community joins. Thunder sounds, and it begins to rain. The camera pans to Aline, who is still performing the ritual. She is soon happily surrounded by her Diola people joining in the rain ritual with her: men, women, and children together.

In this reenactment, Diatta literally takes the place of the male elders with her body, ordering her people to grow the traditional cash crop of the Diola people: rice. Despite jeers from the crowd, she remains firm in her own personhood, empowered as Emitai’s messenger. The choice of what crop to grow is not up to the community; the choice is Emitai’s, who wants the Diola to “rise up”. In protest, Diatta performs the rain ritual, inspiring and empowering other young women to join in resisting alongside her. Diatta helps to return her people to the traditions that defend their cultural identity and connect them to their supreme deity—an ethic of resistance. An ethic of control is found both within the elders and community, who are appalled by Aline’s brazenness, stepping out of her role or status in society, questioning “Who are you?”.⁸² However, Aline’s perseverance in front of the community and elders, seeking equality as a voice of reason, also indicates an ethic of control, empowered again by her role as messenger of Emitai.

Conclusion

Diatta’s *awasena* theology, fostered by her commitment to the Diola *awasena* path, underscores the importance of Emitai, who defines personhood for the Diola community in positive ways that subvert attacks from white supremacist colonialism. The European compromise of taking groundnut labor for tax and devaluing indigenous productions not only compromised the Diola people’s ability to feed their families, but also threatened their personhood as stewards of Emitai’s gifts of knowledge and provision through rice production. The status that the Diola supreme being

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *Seeking Aline*.

provides Diatta, as “one whom Emitai sent”, could have been easily abused. History had shown religious leaders who had been more focused on wealth than equity or the preservation of the *awasena* tradition (also reflective of an ethic of control).⁸³ However, the grounding of *awasena* theology, one with a supreme deity that seeks the *good* of their people against social and material injustice, provides Diatta with a basis from which to discern a *healthy* sense of personhood. It is a personhood that values equity between all human beings, reflective of a high ethic of resistance. *Awasena* theology, ultimately, shapes their adherents’ moral and ethical character by forming a community that acts as one unit. For Diatta, the use of both an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, empowered by *awasena* religion and its subsequent theology, offers a means to survive in a supremacist environment without complete assimilation into harmful systems of oppression and the forgetfulness of self or community: an inspiration to the African diaspora for generations to come.

⁸³ Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 170–71.

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Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the “Woman Who Was More Than a Man”

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