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THE HYENA'S LAST LAUGH

A conversation with Djibril Diop Mambety

by N. Frank Ukadike, from *TRANSITION 78*

They said he was a UFO. "The most paradoxical filmmaker in the history of African cinema." To some, he was "the African Dionysus," or "the prince of Colobane." Others simply called him "D.D.M."

On July 23, 1998, Djibril Diop Mambety died in the Paris hospital where he was being treated for lung cancer. Only fifty-three years old at the time of his death, Mambety was a director, actor, composer, poet, and orator, loved and admired by critics and audiences all over the world.

Mambety had studied drama in Senegal, and he worked as a stage actor at the Daniel Sorano National Theater in Dakar after graduation. But he was expelled from Sorano a short time later--undisciplined, they said--and the experience goaded him to pursue his love affair with cinema. Mambety remembered his expulsion as a kind of challenge: he refused to give up, and immediately set about raising money to make films. Although he had no formal training in cinema, the twenty-four-year-old directed and produced his first film short, *Contras' City* [A city of contrasts], in 1969. Experimental and satirical, the film lampooned the freewheeling cosmopolitanism of Dakar's colonial architecture, in which, as Mambety noted, "we had a Sudanese-style cathedral, a chamber of commerce building looking like a theater, while the theater resembled a block of council flats." Mambety's next short, *Badou Boy*, was released in 1970. The film explored contemporary Senegalese society by pitting an individual against the state: a sly young hooligan, said to be modeled on Mambety himself, spends the film outmaneuvering a crass, bowlegged, overweight policeman. Although both films were box-office disasters, they were critically acclaimed--*Badou Boy* won the Silver Tanit at the 1970 Carthage film Festival in Tunisia.

In 1973, Mambety released his masterpiece, *Touki Bouki* [The hyena's journey], a tour de force of narrative and technical sophistication. It combined the styles of Mambety's first two films, marrying montage and narrative, challenging audiences with its unconventional collage of political and sexual images, enticing them with its story and its use of color and music. *Touki Bouki*, Mambety's first feature-length film, was a critical smash: it won the Special Jury Award at the Moscow film Festival and the International Critics Award at Cannes. It was unlike anything in the history of African cinema; today, film scholars around the world agree that *Touki Bouki* is a classic. Its central themes are wealth, youth, and delusion: Mory and Anta are a fashionable young Senegalese couple on the run--from their families, their home, and their future--dreaming of Europe. The story revolves around the couple's brash and illegal attempts to get enough cash for boat tickets to Paris. But it is less the narrative than its mode of presentation that carries the burden of meaning. Mambety mixes elements of several storytelling techniques to create phantasmal images of postcolonial African society's myriad failings. His presentation invites the viewer to understand these images in dialectical terms.

Despite the film's success, Mambety did not produce another feature for almost twenty years. During this long absence, he was able to make only one film: *Parlons Grand-mère* [Let's talk, Grandmother], a short he made in 1989 while helping his friend, the Burkinabe director Idrissa Ouedraogo, with the filming of *Yaaba*.

In 1992, Mambety returned to the limelight with an ambitious new film, *Hyènes* [Hyenas]. It was an adaptation of the Swiss-German writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt's satirical play *The Visit*. Mambety's authorial voice is strong and clear in *Hyènes*; as one critic observed, the uniqueness of the direction throughout the film "undoubtedly stems in part from his own magisterial sense of presence."

Hyènes was conceived as the second installment, following on *Touki Bouki*, of a trilogy on power and insanity. The grand theme, once again, is human greed. As Mambety himself observed, the story shows how neocolonial relations in Africa are "betraying the hopes of independence for the false promises of Western materialism," and how Africans have been corrupted by that materialism. We follow Linguère Ramatou, a wealthy woman who returns from abroad to the desolate village of Colobane, her birthplace--and Mambety's, as well. Many years before, she had been seduced by a young man, impregnated, and abandoned for a wealthier wife; she was then mercilessly ostracized by her neighbors. Now "as rich as the World Bank," Linguère offers lavish gifts and huge sums of money to the villagers--in exchange for the death of her onetime lover. They accept the deal, and Mambety makes it easy for us to see why. The Colobane of *Hyènes* is a sad reminder of the economic disintegration, corruption, and consumer culture that has enveloped Africa since the 1960s. "We have sold our souls too cheaply," Mambety once said. "We are done for if we have traded our souls for money. That is why childhood is my last refuge." But what remains of Colobane is not the magical childhood Mambety pines for. In the last shot of *Hyènes*, a bulldozer erases the village from the face of the earth. A Senegalese viewer, one writer has claimed, "would know what rose in its place: the real-life Colobane, a notorious thieves' market on the edge of Dakar."

Hyènes confirmed Mambety's stature as one of Africa's greatest auteurs, and it seemed to herald the beginning of a new and

productive phase in his career. After unleashing this pessimistic vision of humanity and society, Mambety began a trilogy of short films about "little people," whom he called "the only true, consistent, unaffected people in the world, for whom every morning brings the same question: how to preserve what is essential to themselves." *Le franc* (1994), a comedy about a poor musician who wins the lottery, exposes the havoc wrought upon the people of Senegal by France's devaluation of the West African Franc (CFA). Mambety was editing the second film in the trilogy, *La petite vendeuse de Soleil* [The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun], when he died.

A portrait of the director published in *Écrans d'Afrique* described some of his peculiarities: "His revolts, his poetry, his alcoholism, his sensitivity, his wanderings, his arrogance, and his lucidity clothe him with a halo of legend--and make him a difficult director." Mambety's dedication to his art is unassailable; he once observed:

One has to choose between engaging in stylistic research or the mere recording of facts. I feel that a filmmaker must go beyond the recording of facts. Moreover, I believe that Africans, in particular, must reinvent cinema. It will be a difficult task because our viewing audience is used to a specific film language, but a choice has to be made: either one is very popular and one talks to people in a simple and plain manner, or else one searches for an African film language that would exclude chattering and focus more on how to make use of visuals and sounds.

In other words, Mambety departs from the linear and didactic patterns of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene and Souleymane Cissé in order to pursue his artistic freedom. It is this refusal to make concessions, even to the audience, that enabled Mambety to mature into a director of international stature.

With his death, Africa has lost a highly talented and creative filmmaker, a rare artist of exceptional insight and perception. The legions of us who admired Djibril Diop Mambety for his humor, vision, creativity, and devotion to African cinema--and those of us who were blessed to know him as a friend, a man of great vitality--will miss him, even as we continue to celebrate his life.

N. FRANK UKADIKE: How did you start making pictures?

DJIBRIL DIOP MAMBETY: I loved pictures when I was a very young boy --but pictures didn't mean cinema to me then. When I was young, I preferred acting to making pictures. So I decided to study drama, but one day in the theater, I realized that I love pictures. That was how I found myself in this thing called cinema. From time to time, I want to make a film, but I am not a filmmaker; I have never been a filmmaker.

When children ask me, "How does one make a film?" I always say that you have to have freedom to make a film, and to have freedom, you need confidence. I tell them to close their eyes, to look at the stars, and look into their hearts, and then to open their eyes and see if the film they want to make is there, in front of their eyes.

I began to make *Hyènes* when I realized I absolutely had to find one of the characters in *Touki Bouki*, which I had made twenty years before. This is Anta, the girl who had the courage to leave Africa and cross the Atlantic alone. When I set out to find her again, I had the conviction that I was looking for a character from somewhere in my childhood. I had a vision that I already had encountered this character in a film. Ultimately, I found her in a play called *The Visit* (1956) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. I had the freedom and confidence to marry his text with my film and make his story my own.

NFU: Many critics are amazed by how well Dürrenmatt's play has been adapted--they never imagined that anyone could do it so well. *Hyènes* follows life in an African village, so it relies heavily on oral tradition, stories, and song. But there are elements of European drama and cinema as well. How did you bring all these sources together?

DDM: Earlier, I focused on the notion of freedom, which includes the freedom not to know. That implies confidence in your ability to construct images from the bottom of your heart. When artists converge on these images, there is no longer room for ethnic peculiarities; there is only room for talent. You mustn't expect me to cut the patrimony of the mind into pieces and fragments. A film is a kind of meeting; there is giving and receiving. Now that I have made it, *Hyènes* belongs as much to the viewer as to me. You must have the freedom and confidence to understand and critique what you see.

NFU: But what are these images that rise from the bottom of your heart? What are you giving to the viewer?

DDM: I am interested in marginalized people, because I believe that they do more for the evolution of a community than the conformists. Marginalized people bring a community into contact with a wider world. The characters of *Touki Bouki* are interesting to me because their dreams are not those of ordinary people. Anta and Mory do not dream of building castles in Africa; they dream of finding some sort of Atlantis overseas. Following their dream permitted me to follow my own dreams, and my way of escaping those dreams was to laugh at them. Mory and Anta's dreams made them feel like foreigners in their own country. So they were marginalized people, in that respect.

If we think of Draman Drameh in *Hyènes*, we find that he, too, is marginalized, although he is a well-known character in the city of Colobane; he is marginal even though he owns a market. Everyone comes in--to buy food, or to have a drink--so Draman Drameh has the key to the "tree of words." Yet he is marginal. Notable, but marginal: the fact that everyone confides in him sets him apart. But this aspect of his character allows me to investigate every aspect of his society. Perhaps a marginal person can give you an accurate vision of a society because he varies from its norms. Linguère Ramatou is also marginalized, because she is exactly the same person who crossed the Atlantic to go to Europe in *Touki Bouki*. She dared to lift up the moorings of the vessel and sail out. She is a rich foreigner. The people of Colobane feel they need her money; you could say, in the language of the World Bank, that she is a marginal person "we want to have." So Linguère Ramatou gives me a measure of my existence in relation to other things.

NFU: I noticed that Linguère Ramatou has an Asian bodyguard in *Hyènes*. How does she fit into this schema?

DDM: The point is not that she is Asian. The point is that everyone in Colobane--everyone everywhere--lives within a system of power that embraces the West, Africa, and the land of the rising sun. There is a scene where this woman comes in and reads: she reads of the vanity of life, the vanity of vengeance; that is totally universal. My goal was to make a continental film, one that crosses boundaries. To make *Hyènes* even more continental, we borrowed elephants from the Masai of Kenya, hyenas from Uganda, and people from Senegal. And to make it global, we borrowed somebody from Japan, and carnival scenes from the annual Carnival of Humanity of the French Communist Party in Paris. All of these are intended to open the horizons, to make the film universal. The film depicts a human drama. My task was to identify the enemy of humankind: money, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. I think my target is clear.

While *Hyènes* tells a human story to the whole world, I also wanted to pay homage to the beauty of Africa when I made the film. For me, part of that beauty is the fact that it is not very difficult to make a film in Africa. The abandoned bags of rice that the people of Colobane wear at the end of the film did not cost much; it was only the equipment for the production that was a little expensive. I have a great desire to demystify cinema--especially the financial aspect of cinema. Africa is rich in cinema, in images. Hollywood could not have made this film, no matter how much money they spent. The future belongs to images. Students, like the children I referred to earlier, are waiting to discover that making a film is a matter of love, not money.

NFU: The pioneers of African cinema often made films with an openly political, didactic purpose--one thinks of Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* or Med Hondo's *Soleil O*. How do you combine education and entertainment in your own films?

DDM: I do not refuse the word *didactic*. I follow the same principle as a story. When a story ends--or "falls into the ocean," as we say--it creates dreams. It has energy and direction. I hope that all my stories finish by presenting a lesson for society, but there is also great freedom in my way of seeing and treating things. I do the audience justice: they have the freedom to enter or not to enter into my stories. They are free to take their own path, to enter or to leave. In one word, "liberty" is what characterizes what I am doing.

NFU: Your style is radically different from other African filmmakers. What sets you apart?

DDM: *Style* is a word that I do not like. I have never pursued a single style, and the others haven't done that, either. I believe that each filmmaker goes his own way, but each person is constantly evolving, changing as he looks to the light he receives that helps him advance. So I don't like the word *style*. On the other hand, I have found that I am able to make films because each film sets me free to think about the subject I take on. When I plan a film, the ideas flow naturally from my original dream, from conception to finish.

NFU: There were certainly African films before *Touki Bouki*, but the style of your film is quite different; many people think it broke new aesthetic ground. What about the gyrating camera movements, the editing technique--the jump cuts, colliding montage, and so forth--where did they come from?

DDM: It's the way I dream. To do that, one must have a mad belief that everything is possible--you have to be mad to the point of being irresponsible. Because I know that cinema must be reinvented, reinvented each time, and whoever ventures into cinema also has a share in its reinvention.

NFU: I will never forget the first time I heard the eerie combination of human screams and gull's cries in *Touki Bouki*, or the juxtaposition of the saxophone and the muezzin's prayer in *Le franc*. I know you were a composer before you started making films. How do you choose your music, and who do you work with?

DDM: I do not choose the music, I choose the sound. All movement is accompanied by a sense. I like wind very much. Wind is music, just as music is wind. I try to make the image illustrate the movement. Wind, like music, is the breath of movement and life. It has to do with stimulation: from the images I do the music, from the music I do the sound. But sound is not something foreign to adorn the film. It is intrinsic to the film; it magnifies the action.

NFU: There are many symbols of death in *Hyènes*. Why are the inhabitants of Colobane dressed as they are, and why do they wear wigs?

DDM: The people of Colobane are dressed in rice bags. They are hungry; they are ready to eat Draman Drameh. They are all disguised because no one wants to carry the individual responsibility for murder. So what they have in common is cowardice. For each individual to have clean hands, everybody has to be dirty, to share in the same communal guilt. So the people of Colobane become animals. Their hair makes them buffaloes. The only thing they have that is human is greed.

NFU: So despite your insistence on freedom and immediacy, you are very deliberate, very careful in choosing costume and other forms of characterization, very careful about how you structure your films.

DDM: It seems to me that when we talk about structure, we enter into confusion. To me, structure often means premeditation. My work is not based on premeditation or planning; it is based on the instant. The instant is motivated. It arises from the necessities of discourse. Well, I do not like the word *discourse*, so perhaps I should have said the instant is forced by the necessities of movement. Movement creates its own internal dynamic, and the different effects of a film--text, music, image--arise from this dynamic: they are never separated. So costume is not an ornament, it is the reflection of a situation. In *Hyènes*, the people of Colobane would not have been able to enact a collective murder if they had each kept their individual clothing. If the mayor had dressed like a mayor, if the professor had dressed like a professor, then they would have felt individual responsibility. But the instant of murder required collective responsibility, and this required a mask. The mask is what makes it impossible for the townspeople to recognize good and bad. That is why we made them animals, because animals commit this kind of murder. For that reason, their hair is done as that of the buffalo--the laughingstock of the savanna--and the rice bags they wear symbolize their objective. Their objective is to amass as many riches as possible and to create the deadly harmony that Linguère Ramatou desires.

NFU: You've said that power and madness are recurrent themes in *Hyènes*, as in your other films. What do you mean by that?

DDM: I do not have a grand explanation of power and madness. I think that the power of madness is one thing, and the madness of power is another thing. Together, they are too heavy for human beings. That is not an explanation or an ideology. In these matters, humans are mere toys.

NFU: If humans are toys, then what about animals? Why are you obsessed with hyenas?

DDM: The hyena is an African animal--you know that. It never kills. The hyena is falsehood, a caricature of man. The hyena comes out only at night; he is afraid of daylight, like the hero of *Touki Bouki*--he does not want to see daylight, he does not want to see himself by daylight, so he always travels at night. He is a liar, the hyena. The hyena is a permanent presence in humans, and that is why man will never be perfect. The hyena has no sense of shame, but it represents nudity, which is the shame of human beings.

After I unveiled this very pessimistic picture of human beings and society in their nakedness in *Hyènes*, I wanted to build up the image of the common people. Why should I magnify the ordinary person after this debauch of defects? The whole society of Colobane is made up of ordinary people. I do not want to remain forever pessimistic. That is why I have fished out cases where man, taken individually, can defeat money. Think of *Le franc*. The hero of the film is going crazy because of a lottery ticket, but he manages to hold on because he has the power of dreaming. In *La petite vendeuse de Soleil*, all the protagonist wants is to sell her magazines, but money comes to subvert her plan. A rich man comes along, and a magazine that should cost 5 francs is sold for 500 francs. Thus, the rich man creates a problem, but she manages to escape this problem, because she dreams of something better. In the third part, *La tailleuse de pierre* [The stonecutter], a woman excavates pieces of basalt. She breaks them into smaller stones that can be used in construction. People who want modern buildings in their neighborhood ask her to move her workshop away. But she can conquer the ugliness and dirtiness of human beings because she is close to the truth. So *La tailleuse de pierre* shows how an individual can dream of beauty.

NFU: It's quite remarkable that you've never used the same actor twice in the twenty-five years you've been making films. You don't use professional actors at all, and yet in your films, everyone acts like a professional . . .

DDM: The professional actor does not exist. Economically, yes, but basically, no. Professional actors break the magic of the dream and the magic of cinema. I say that as a creator and manipulator of character and event. I do not want to use an actor again once we have worked together. Once we have worked together, it seems to me that the actor has already given everything, because I have already asked everything of him or her. So we leave each other in the fullness of our first meeting. When I was young, when I went to the movies, I was always angry when I saw an actor who had died in one film appearing in another film alive. That broke the magic of cinema for me. It is very important to preserve the magic of cinema. For example, at the end of *Hyènes*, if you want to know where Draman Drameh's body has gone, you risk breaking the magic. Only magic knows where his body has gone. Cinema is magic in the service of dreams.

NFU: Do you think the African film industry is capable of sustaining itself in the future?

DDM: There are others who can respond to this better than me, but I know that Africa is immensely rich in cinematic potential. It is good for the future of cinema that Africa exists. Cinema was born in Africa, because the image itself was born in Africa. The instruments, yes, are European, but the creative necessity and rationale exist in our oral tradition. As I said to the children before, in order to make a film, you must only close your eyes and see the images. Open your eyes, and the film is there. I want these children to understand that Africa is a land of images, not only because images of African masks revolutionized art throughout the world but as a result, simply and paradoxically, of oral tradition. Oral tradition is a tradition of images. What is said is stronger than what is written; the word addresses itself to the imagination, not the ear. Imagination creates the image and the image creates cinema, so we are in direct lineage as cinema's parents.

NFU: What about the silent films, before the talkies?

DDM: That doesn't change anything. Oral tradition does not just mean opening your mouth. It means evoking, creating, and writing.

NFU: Are you referring to the quality of films?

DDM: Quality, quality. Everything has to be perfect, but what does *perfect* mean? It means that something is well communicated. It does not mean *adorned with makeup*. It means *clearly said*. What's essential is communication.

NFU: But films that just communicate --films that aren't as good as yours--often can't be shown outside the countries where they were produced.

DDM: I am all for the quality of things--the total quality. As I said more than twenty years ago, for the educated African, Chinese, or Japanese, nothing authorizes mediocrity.

NFU: Do you see any possibilities for coproductions with other countries? You made *Hyènes* with Thelma films in Switzerland, for example.

DDM: I don't want to talk about Europe. Let's talk about making films in Africa. Europe is not important for me. Where the money to make a film comes from doesn't matter.

NFU: In Africa, the little country of Burkina Faso has done quite a lot to develop continental film. They have built truly pan-African facilities for education and production; and of course there is FESPACO [Le Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou].

DDM: I don't want to talk about Burkina Faso, either, except to point out that Burkina means tiger and Faso means lamb. For me, Burkina Faso is the dream of Africa's future. When I think of Burkina Faso, I see the future I dream for Africa and--why not?--for the whole world. One day, the world could all be like Burkina Faso, even if the hyenas do everything they can to prevent that.

NFU: I noticed that you are selling *Hyènes* on video. Is this your way of coping with the problems of distribution and exhibition on the African continent?

DDM: I work in my own way. We just created the notion of *films de poche* [pocket films]. We are putting a lot of African films on video, so we can distribute them to people at prices that rival the price of books. Of course, we also need more VCRs in Africa if we are to make our films truly accessible. This will revolutionize African cinema. Our premise is that our population must see our films as much as possible. We can't just dream about this. We have lost twenty years already. No miracle could just make the distribution of films in cinema houses effective overnight. So we must invent such things as the *film de poche*.

NFU: But Hollywood releases their films in the theaters before the video version.

DDM: With films de poche, we are trying to develop a way to distribute films *in Africa*. The first example is *Hyènes*, which is already a *film de poche*; there will be a whole series of these films. In a society that we call unreciprocative to writing and reading, images must supplement the word. That is why selling *Hyènes* on video will make a big difference.

NFU: Your first film, *Contras' City*, is an interesting film; I understand it as a critique of the social hierarchy of Dakar. What motivated you to make the film?

DDM: The motivation? The motivation is always the picture, and for me it is always pictures from the place where you were born, the place you come from. I never dream about some other world, away from home. What I have always wanted to explore is my relationship with images, with the cinema; I want to see it, make an image of it, from the perspective of eternity. I am not a creature of eternity, though: the place I was born is umbilical. It is as if I were born into an envelope, a lake from whose waters I never emerge. Every time I make a film, the creativity comes out of that original envelope. For me, filming is remembering.

NFU: Looking at the images of *Contras' City*, it is easy to understand how the film relates to you, to the society, to Africa in general, and to colonial and neocolonial encounters.

DDM: I don't want to tell stories. I only want to create, to give pleasure. As soon as I begin to make a picture, the creativity and the images come from imagination, from somewhere, which I call accident. Otherwise it is dilettantism. If my films have a political motivation, that is not my basic preoccupation.

NFU: But the critique of architecture in *Contras' City* suggests you believe that foreign intervention has amounted to an assault on African culture.

DDM: If you have a child, you must remember that you have been a child: you cannot forget how your mother carried you on her back. And if you see that your own child is not carried as well as your mother carried you, you can react by saying, "No. No, it is not like that, that is not my mother's way. This is not my origin; it is not the way I want my baby to be carried." That's my point of view; it may relate to architecture, to today's events, to our memory, our history. If it leads to criticism, for me in any case, that criticism relates to how I imagine that my mother carried me well. I allowed myself to be amused in *Contras' City*, so as to make the viewer experience anticolonialist laughter. But anticolonialist laughter is ultimately laughter at oneself. I am not an ideologist. I can't just love and refuse to love.

Touki Bouki is very important in this context. When I begin to dream of other places, to be obsessed by them to the point of becoming a stranger in my own country like Mory and Anta in *Touki Bouki*, my natural instinct is to refuse the temptation. That is what has set the course of my life; I have always found it sad to be away from home.

NFU: Yet whenever I go to FESPACO, I see many films that present the norms of African culture in a harsh light. What guides your concern for tradition? Do you have any advice for ambitious young filmmakers?

DDM: I don't conduct myself with reference to other people. I am not a contrarian. So comparison with anything else stops there. Regarding my young colleagues, I have not seen many of their films. I rarely go to the cinema. Perhaps someday I will be able to explain to you why I rarely see films, even African ones. I have said to the young filmmakers, "If you want to make a film, please think thoroughly about the content of the film you would make." But I cannot compare their films to mine; I cannot talk about African cinema. I have seen fewer African films than you have.

NFU: What are your own future projects?

DDM: I will finish the third part of the trilogy about ordinary people. After that, I will make *Malaika*, the third part of the trilogy about the power of craziness. The first two were *Touki Bouki* and *Hyènes*. Then I will consult God about the state of the world.

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