

HYENAS

Written and directed by Djibril Diop Mambety
Produced by Pierre-Alain Meier
and Alain Rozanese

Thelma Film AG. Zurich; ADR Productions; Paris, Maag Daan, Dakar; MK2 Productions Paris; 1992. *Color*, 110 minutes. *English/French subtitles. Distributed by California Newsreel,* San Francisco. *Rental $95, sale $195.*

Reviewed by Dennis F. Essar

Debuting at the 1992 Cannes festival. *Hyenas* is Djibril Diop Mambety's first major film in almost twenty years, and only his second feature. However, this recent release and the earlier film, Touki Bouki (1973), have secured for the Senegalese filmmaker a position of authority and prestige in black African cinema that far outweighs the volume of his production

Readers of Birago Diop's *Contes d'Amadou Koumba* or other folktales borrowed from West African oral literature immediately notice that the title of the first film also has something to do with hyenas. *Bouki,* Wolof for hyena, is the name given to the greedy, mischievous, evil-smelling trickster of oral tradition (Pfaff 1988:220). *Touki-Bouki,* which means "The Hyena's Journey," tells of Mory, a marginalized young Senegalese propelled into a life of crime and perversity in order to realize his ambition of emigration to France. The frenetic pace of Mory's dash for freedom and well-being is reflected brilliantly in the innovative cinematographic style adopted by Mambety for this earlier film. The rapid panoramic shots, jolting cut-aways, and generally frantic rhythms contrast markedly with what Nwachukwu Ukadike calls the "static and languid" cameras of earlier African cinema (1994:176). In Touki Bouki it is the main character who is the hyena: on the margins of a society convulsing with rapid, profound, and irreversible cultural change, he strives to achieve his fanciful goal at any cost.

Not so in *Hyenas* The main character, the old and white-haired Draman Drameh, played by Mansour Diouf, embodies characteristics the very opposite of Mory's. He is noble and poised in bearing and language, thoughtful, generous, cheerful, polite, and kind. Moreover, his ambitions carry him no farther than his dusty and run-down home town of Colobane.[1] Indeed, at a moment of critical danger to himself near the end of the film, he refuses to leave the community, preferring to remain and face death at the hands of his fellow townsfolk.

Draman Drameh represents a dying breed. A tenacious proponent of traditional values and comportment, he is out of step with contemporary African society on the brink of catastrophic change. All the inhabitants of Colobane, including the mayor, the elders, the women, Drameh's friends, and even the *marabout*, or Muslim religious leader, agree to sacrifice him in order to gain access to fabulous sums of money and trendy foreign goods. Ironically, it is a past error of Drameh's which has set into

motion the *process* whereby the money is made available to the villagers, an error for which they decide to call their old friend to account in order to justify their hyenic greed. So in the end, Drameh gets his just desserts, paying for his crime with his life. But in the process, all that is noble and enriching in the traditional life we glimpse at the beginning of the film is lost.

The pace of the second film, a surprise to critics who had celebrated the innovations of *Touki Bouki,* marks a return to the static camera of earlier African cinema. Lingering shots of faces, objects, vast landscapes (blue skies, striking red laterite soils), and groups of animals and people all slow the pace of the narrative to a crawl. In so doing, Mambety links the tenacious values of traditional life with the unrelenting landscape. In the end it is the irresistible lure of Western material wealth, acting upon the pack of greedy villagers who are the hyenas of this tale, that destroys Drameh and transforms the village and even the landscape. A final scene shows a solitary baobab tree, standing alone on the horizon above an expanse of laterite torn and scarred by construction equipment.

The opening credits of the film declare Mambety's debt to Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1955 play *The* Visit *(Der Besuch der Alten Dame).* The characters of the film, the main plot line, and even substantial portions of the dialogue are lifted directly from the play in Mambety's laconic adaptation. Dürrenmatt has declared in a postscript to the play that he has no hidden ideological or philosophical agendas: "I have described people, not marionettes, an action and not an allegory. I have presented a world, not pointed a moral..." (1962:105). Similarly, Mambety has declared that his films are not ironic vehicles for political ideas or revolutionary statements (Pfaff 1988:218-19). However, as critics have pointed out (Pfaff 1988-219; Rayfield 1995:78), Mambety has indeed, despite his protestations to the contrary, made use of Durrenmatt's timeless story of collective greed in order to speak of the destruction of ancient social values and structures in Africa and Senegal today. Therein lies the genius of his adaptation

The plots of both play and film turn on the adventures of a man and woman, formerly lovers but now old. In the play, Alfred III (the film's Draman Drameh) has lived out his uneventful life in the faded village of Guellen, "[a] broken-down shopkeeper in a broken-down town" (Dürrenmatt 1962:29). In his youth he was the lover of Claire Wascher (Linguère Ramatou in the film, played by Ami Diakhate), a poor girl whom he impregnated and then spumed in order to marry a woman with money. At a paternity hearing held before the birth of the child, he produced witnesses whom he bribed to say they had also slept with Wascher, who thus left town in disgrace. But through the years, as III has grown poorer in Guellen, Wascher, by fair means and foul, has acquired an enormous fortune along with a confusing string of rich and influential husbands (she marries number nine in the course of the play). She has bought and closed all the industries of Guellen in shrewd preparation for her return to the town, after years of absence and much the worse for wear, in order to seek revenge on Ill. According to her exquisitely cynical plan, she will donate an enormous sum of money to the town in exchange for III's death. Patrick Bowles's translation of the play cites the amount as "a million pounds" (Dürrenmatt 1962:36). but in the German original, the figure is "eine Milliarde" (Dürrenmatt 1961:51), a billion in North America. (In the subtitles of the film, incidentally, the sum is given as "a hundred thousand million,"but the dialogue dearly indicates that they should have read "a hundred thousand *billion*." Even in devalued CFA francs, this is still an unimaginably large sum of money.) In any event, half of this colossal amount will be given to the town, while the rest will be paid directly to the citizens. Not unexpectedly, the townsfolk decide, after decent hesitation, to honor Wascher's request. In exchange for the promise of all these ill-gotten pieces of silver, they sacrifice their old friend, claiming he must, after all, pay for his crimes of bribery and perjury.

In his film, Mambety has simplified Dürrenmatt's plot and characterization and made appropriate substitutions where required by the transfer of the action from a verdant if impoverished central European town to the red dust of Colobane. But beyond these superficial variations, the atmosphere of the film is quite different. The dialogues are less verbose, scene changes are fewer and less dramatic, accessory objects are more numerous and play a greater signifying role, and especially, the characters all seem burdened by the weight of the vast and monotonous landscape to which frequent visual reference is made. In general, the characters are morose, laconic, given to stately actions, slow processions. Even at the moments of betrayal of traditional values, they retain this poise and noble bearing.

Another even more substantial innovation is the use of cut-away shots of African fauna in order to emphasize certain aspects of the behavior of human characters. This technique is reminiscent of the West African folktale, in which a human characteristic is associated with an animal that suggests the same trait. The opening frames of the film show a herd of elephants in slow procession across a desert plain. In the following sequence, the animals become a group of men, slowly walking toward Draman Drameh's tavern-grocer. The metaphor is clear: people survive as a community, uniting to present a massive common front while independent individuals are doomed. (A flash scene at one point in the film shows a hyena standing over the carcass of an elephant.) In the tavern sequences, cut-aways to a chained baboon, dressed in comic human garb, recall the mindlessly destructive baboon character in Diop's *Contes d'Amadou Koumba* The fall of humanity into monkeydom is always possible, as we are reminded during the final death scene in which Drameh's assassins chatter (in Wolof). "For justice's sake. For justice's sake." In addition, Mambety may be drawing sarcastic attention to a prejudiced Occidental attitude toward the traditional African. Ironically, however, it is not until they have been thoroughly infected with Western materialism that the townsfolk really begin to act and chatter, like a troop of baboons.

Other cut-aways to animals and birds provide similar suggestions of psychic and behavioral parallels between humans and animal species Obvious examples are eagles and especially vultures, swooping down to consume their prey, predator owls, perched and watchful in the darkness, and of course, the hyenas, laughing and yapping in the background during certain dramatic scenes, and shown directly when humans are about to perform some rapacious deed. Even Drameh is metaphorically compared to a vulture when, alone with Ramatou shortly after her arrival in Colobane, he tries to persuade her to donate some money in order to save the town.

Not all such animal references are visual. Toward the end of the film, when Ramatou's millions have done their work in the hearts of the villagers ("The reign of the hyenas has



Mansour Diouf and Ami Diakhate as Draman Drameh and Linguère Ramatou, from *Hyenas.*



Drameh confronted by soldiers.

begun," murmurs the schoolmaster), the loitering men in Drameh's tavern sing, "The lion died last night," in reference to the grand old man they are about to sacrifice.

The revolution in the hearts of this crowd of assassins is further emphasized by their curious appearance in the murder scene: they wear hairpieces consisting of heavy braids covering their ears, turned up at the ends like horns of the African buffalo. It is the style affected first by Ramatou herself, who has had her hair fashioned in this way, possibly in imitation of the style of one of her stately and mysterious ladies-in-waiting. It may be that Mambety is suggesting a parallel between the unpredictable and choleric nature of the powerful buffalo and the greedy crowd.

A final reference is contained in the song which accompanies the closing credits "The *ramatou* bird *flew* off and returned," intone the singers, referring to Linguère Ramatou who had similarly flown away and returned. *Ramatou* is the Wolof name for the orange-cheeked waxbill, a common species in Senegal, which presumably reappears on a seasonal basis and would befamiliar to a West African public

The rich variety of the bestiary textually and visually portrayed in the film thus complements other references to the natural order, and to the stability of traditional human societies living in harmony with nature. That this order has been irrevocably subverted in *Hyenas* is underscored by a striking sequence of scenes showing the traditional hunter with his muzzle-loader and game belt, identified in the final credits as *"le seigneur de la plume*" (lord of the feather). This character alone, according to oral tradition (see, for example, the tale titled "La Biche et les Deux Chasseurs" [Diop 1961:137-53]), may transgress upon the prevailing harmony of the natural world by hunting and killing. He acts out the prerogatives of his special status by hunting only with a respect for natural order that is almost liturgical. In the film, the character appears occasionally as an unnamed, unobtrusive observer of the goings-on in Colobane At
the end he is briefly courted and symbolically 1 praised by Drameh, who drives a Citroen Deux-Chevaux convertible in wide circles around him as he walks across the plain. After Drameh's demise (in fact his body disappears and only his clothes are left in a heap), the hunter passes by, examines the clothing, throws away his gun, and walks away. Humanity no longer exists as a stable presence within nature, the hunter as mediator no longer has a task to perform.

These oblique and perhaps playful references to tradition as paradise lost (after all, hyenas existed too in the African paradise of oral tradition) are coupled in the film with equally playful indications of the growing presence and power of foreign money and consumer goods in African society. Even in Drameh's jolly tavern shown at the beginning of the film (as close to an African paradise as we get), plastic Coca-Cola crates are piled high along the walls as Drameh gives free drinks to his unemployed compatriots, joins them in song and dance, cheerfully greets the women who come for their groceries, and promises, in African fashion, to go and visit them with his wife. Meanwhile, happy candidates for circumcision dress in white robes and cone-shaped initiate caps, repeat their lessons, and cavort through the town.

Even before Ramatou arrives on the appointed day, the foundations of this traditional community begin to crack, "Linguère Ramatou, who left here so long ago, is returning richer than the World Bank." exults one of the characters, with reference to an institution portrayed by Mambety' as the source of credit for which newly materialistic Africans are willing to mortgage their souls. While her retinue includes three noble ladies, attired in African finery and bedecked with amber, and two charming young hairdressers, she is also accompanied by a uniformed female Japanese bodyguard who carries a portable telephone, drives Ramatou's Chevrolet, and sullenly reads the New York *Herald-Tribune.* At the welcoming ceremony, the mayor of Colobane wears Western clothes (including a cowboy hat) andspeaks from a rostrum draped with a French flag. As the floodgates of consumerism are opened, well-known product names appear with growing frequency: Remington, Sony, Dunhill. The inhabitants demand expensive foreign goods rather than cheaper local ones, and insist on paying on account. A new town hall is proposed (the furniture of the old one is seized at the beginning of the film), everyone dresses in fine clothes. Drameh's wife herself stocks up on refrigerators and rotating fans, filling the shop with exotic goods, and even the chapel gets a new chandelier. In a final festive orgy of celebration, the mayor plays a saxophone, the initiates run about in blue jeans, and fireworks fill the firmament as amusement-park rides twist and gyrate into the night.

The lesson to be learned from this allegorical Feast of Fools is that Western industrial society places before traditional communities the irresistible attractions of easy credit and luxury consumer goods, leading them to abandon their values, betray their nature, and thus become hyenas. In the film, Linguère Ramatou is shown to be the source of this subversion: "Life made me a whore," she declares, "and now' I'll make the world a brothel....Either you get blood on your hands, or you remain poor forever" As in the play, it is her thirst for revenge that brings ruin upon the community by loosing the power of greed among its inhabitants. But for Mambety, the play is only a pretext. The real source of evil, the origin of the metamorphosis, is colonialism and its neocolonial descendance. Chronological references in the film situate the action in about 1975, after the early stages of Senegal's independence, when new African nations by the score found their earlier optimism stifled by the hard realities of international finance, the Cold War, posteolonial boundaries, and the difficulties of accommodating modem infrastructure, industry, and armament within traditional culture.

In a prescription reminiscent of eighteenth-century physiocratic idealism, the concluding song, dedicated to Dürrenmatt, proposes what is no doubt a hopelessly unrealistic alternative to dependence upon development aid, imported goods, and foreign credit:

Get up and work
Get up and work in the fields
Get up and work the soil
Get to work and stop talking
If you don't get up in good time and
start work,
How will you find your freedom?

Mambety himself is pessimistic: "We are done for…We are done for...We have sold our soul too cheaply" (Mambety in Rayfield 1995:81). In the final scenes of the film, as the credits roll by, the people again become elephants and wander away, construction equipment tears at the soil, a jet roars overhead, and the desert haze thins to reveal the glittering skyline of Dakar The old order has definitely given way to the new, but Draman Drameh is no longer there, the hunter hunts no more, and the baobab stands alone