

HYPERALLERGIC

FILM

A Filmmaker Captures the Seduction of Prosperity and Its False Promises

Mambéty made films that are political only on a broad, symbolic level, and their subject is the soul of a people who have been tricked into a troubling fate.



Craig Hubert April 25, 2019



Ami Diakhate (as Linguere Ramatou) and Mansour Diouf (as Dramaan) in *Hyenas*, a film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, a Metrograph Pictures release (all images courtesy Metrograph Pictures)

The cinema of Djibril Diop Mambéty is filled with dreamers. But it's a complicated dream, one in which there's a tension between the seduction of leaving and the desire to stay. "When I begin to dream of other places, to be obsessed by them to

the point of becoming a stranger in my own country ... my natural instinct is to refuse the temptation," the Senegalese film director said in an [interview](#) shortly before his death in 1998. "That is what has set the course of my life; I have always found it sad to be away from home."

Sadness over the idea of home — what it was, what it could become,

and what it now resembles — is at the center of *Hyenas*, Mambéty's 1992 film. Only his second, and sadly final, feature-length film, made 19 years after his groundbreaking *Touki Bouki* and originally conceived as the second part of a trilogy that was never completed, *Hyenas* was finally restored in 2018 and will receive a theatrical run at Metrograph in New York City beginning April 26.



Kaoru Egushi (far right, as Toko) in *Hyenas*, a film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, a Metrograph Pictures release

Adapted from Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *The Visit*, the film tells the story of Linguère Ramatou, a woman who returns to the small village of Colobane in Dakar, where she was born. She is now rich — “as rich as the World Bank,” the film repeatedly

reminds viewers — and the town hopes she will save them from poverty. But she reveals that her help comes in the form of a bargain: for her fortune the community must kill Dramaan Drameh, the local grocery owner who, once upon a time, seduced the young Ramatou and left her with their child. The scandal forced her to leave home and now she has returned, a different person, seeking revenge.



Mansour Diouf (center, as Dramaan) in *Hyenas*, a film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, a Metrograph Pictures release

What follows is humorously tragic — the facial expressions of Mansour Diouf, in the role of Dramaan, especially add a dose of levity — filled with what Mambéty called “anti-colonialist laughter,” which, in the end, is “ultimately laughter at

oneself.” Greed ultimately overtakes the village like a form of madness, and it's easy to understand why they have made their choice to kill Dramaan. Colobane, which is also the birthplace of Mambéty, is in dire

straits. All the furniture has been seized from town hall, and most can't afford even a drink. Everybody is broke. While the townspeople at first refuse Ramatou's offer of material wealth, they can't refuse her gifts. The promise of prosperity spells the end for Dramaan.



Ami Diakhate (center, as Linguere Ramatou) in *Hyenas*, a film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, a Metrograph Pictures release

The post-colonial hope that hovered around *Touki Bouki* has now vanished. Escape from their past was once the dream, but now it has evaporated. In fact, the dream was a false one from the start. When two of the villagers approach Ramatou, telling her that all they want is

for her to help reopen the factories so they can work and set their economy back in motion, her response seals their demise. "It's all mine already," she says. "The factories, the fields, the town, the roads, the houses, they're all mine. I had my agents buy the whole lot. I closed the factories." The person from whom they seek help is actually the cause of their pain.

Animals, which play an important role in storytelling across the African continent, show up again and again in Mambéty's films. In *Touki Bouki* it is the slaughtering of a cow that mirrors the main character's own struggle, and the iconic image of bull horns that adorn the front of his motorcycle, which Beyoncé and Jay-Z [paid homage to](#) in an image from promotional materials for a 2018 tour. *Hyenas* opens with a herd of elephants that quickly cuts to a crowd of people, and intercuts images of hyenas as a symbol for the community's loss of dignity in the face of promised wealth. Materialism has turned the people of the town into hyenas, the character of Senegalese "trickster" folktales who cannot be trusted. "The hyena is a permanent presence in humans, and that is why man will never be perfect," Mambéty said in an interview. As one character warns Dramaan toward the end of the film, "The reign of the hyenas has begun."

The hyenas have been in control for a long time. This deep pessimism is central to Mambéty's work, which presents a vision of Senegal under



Mansour Diouf (center, as Dramaan) in *Hyenas*, a film by Djibril Diop Mambéty, a Metrograph Pictures release

constant exploitation. The film works on the level of a dreamlike fable, which sets Mambéty apart in the history of African cinema from the post-colonial polemics of Ousmane Sembene and his more-recent admirer, Abderrahmane Sissako, to name only two who have

achieved international acclaim. Mambéty made films that are political only on a broad, symbolic level, their subject the soul of a people who have been tricked into an even worse fate.

The film ends with what is perhaps Mambéty's greatest symbolic punch. Following Dramaan's death, we see a bulldozer crushing the earth. The past is being erased, and what comes next is globalized development — we see the skyline of tall buildings in the distance, and the sound of airplanes flying overhead. For the residents of Colobane, their home is disappearing. Money that was a blessing turns out to be a curse.

Hyenas opens at Metrograph (7 Ludlow Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) on April 26, with nationwide expansion to follow.