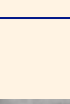


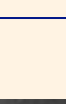
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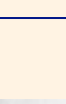
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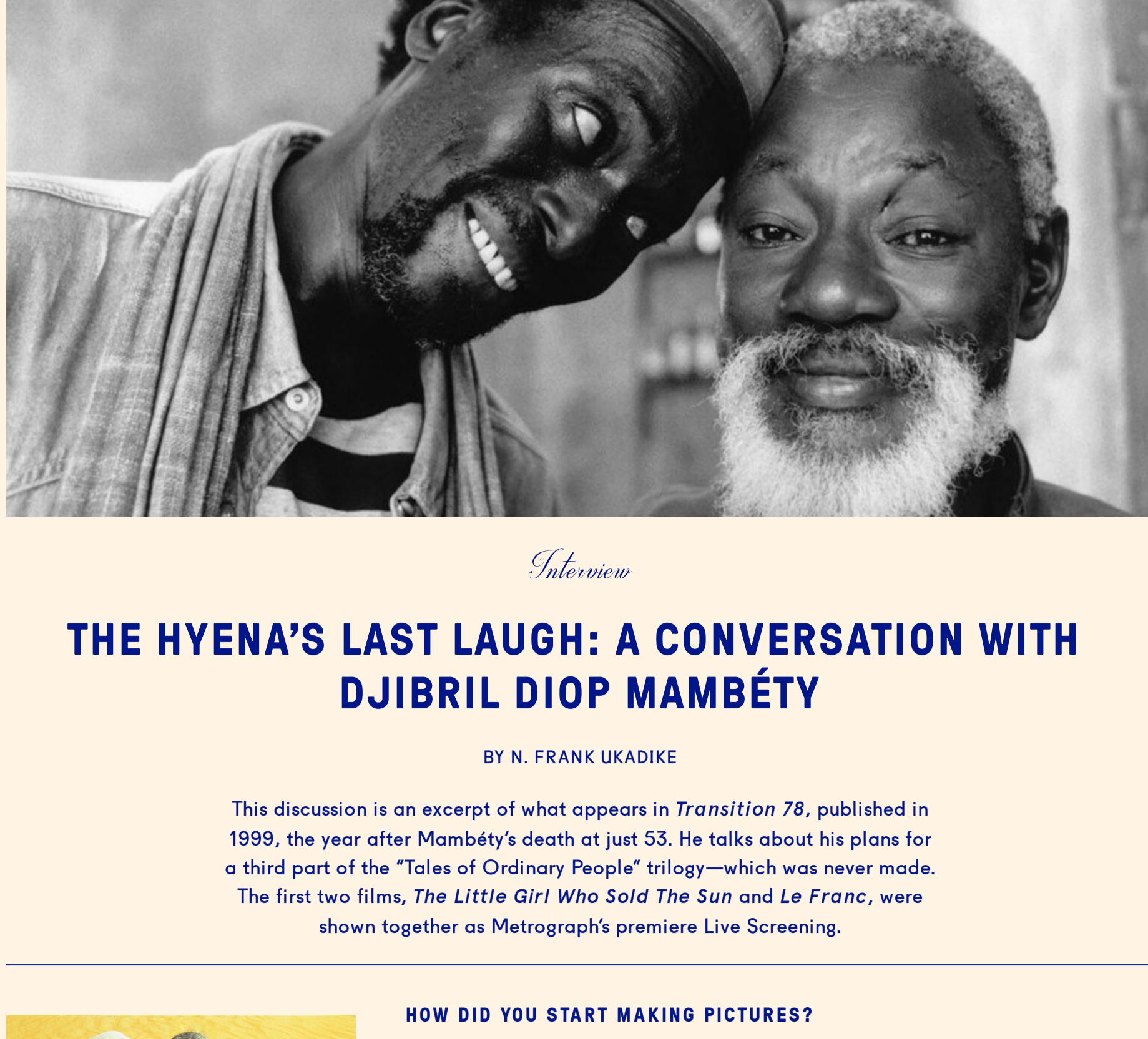
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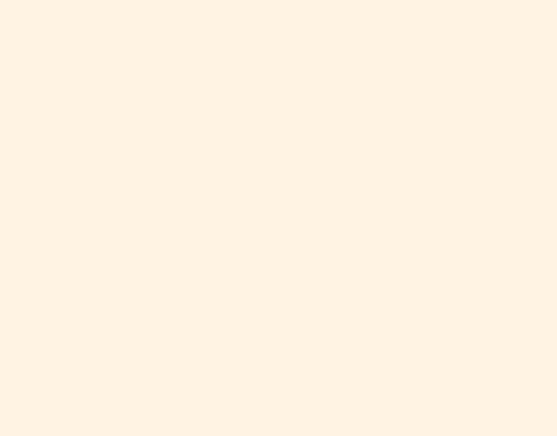


Interview

THE HYENA'S LAST LAUGH: A CONVERSATION WITH DJIBRIL DIOP MAMBÉTY

BY N. FRANK UKADIKE

This discussion is an excerpt of what appears in *Transition 78*, published in 1999, the year after Mambéty's death at just 53. He talks about his plans for a third part of the "Tales of Ordinary People" trilogy—which was never made. The first two films, *The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun* and *Le Franc*, were shown together at Metropgraph's premiere Live Screening.



HYENAS

HOW DID YOU START MAKING PICTURES?

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 films when I realized I absolutely had to find one of the characters in *Touki Bouki*, which I had made 20 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.

MANY CRITICS ARE LAME BEYOND HOW WELL DÜRRENMATT'S PLAY HAS BEEN ADAPTED—THEY NEVER IMAGINE THAT ANYONE COULD DO IT SO WELL. HYENAS FOLLOWS LIFE IN AN AFRICAN CITY. HOW CAN YOU BRING ALL THESE SOURCES TOGETHER?

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 put the cottony 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, *Hyenas* belongs to much more the viewer as to me. You must have the freedom and confidence to understand and critique what you see.

“I AM INTERESTED IN MARGINALIZED PEOPLE, BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THEY DO MORE FOR THE EVOLUTION OF A COMMUNITY THAN THE CONFORMISTS.”

BUT WHAT ARE THESE IMAGES THAT RISE FROM THE BOTTOM OF YOUR HEART? WHAT ARE YOU GIVING TO THE VIEWER?

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 Dramaan Dramah in *Hyenas*, 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 Dramaan Dramah 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.

LINGUÈRE RAMATOU HAS AN ASIAN BODYGUARD IN HYENAS. HOW DOES SHE FIT INTO THIS SCHEMA?

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 *Hyenas* 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 *Hyenas* 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.

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 SOLEÏ O. HOW DO YOU COMBINE EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT IN YOUR OWN FILMS?

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.



TOUKI BOUKI

YOUR STYLE IS RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER AFRICAN FILMMAKERS. WHAT SETS YOU APART?

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.

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 GRATING CAMERA MOVEMENTS, THE EDITING TECHNIQUE—THE JUMP CUTS, COLLIDING MONTAGE, AND SO FORTH—WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

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.

BUT WHAT ARE THESE IMAGES THAT RISE FROM THE BOTTOM OF YOUR HEART? WHAT ARE YOU GIVING TO THE VIEWER?

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“CINEMA WAS BORN IN AFRICA, BECAUSE THE IMAGE ITSELF WAS BORN IN AFRICA.”



LE FRANC

I WILL NEVER FORGET THE FIRST TIME I HEARD THE EERIE COMBINATION OF HUMAN SCREAMS AND GULL'S CRIES IN TOUKI BOUKI, THE JUXTAPPOSITION 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?

I do not choose the music, I choose the sound. Just as movement is composed 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.

THERE ARE MANY SYMBOLS OF DEATH IN HYENAS. WHY ARE THE INHABITANTS OF COLOBANE DRESSED AS THEY ARE, AND WHY DO THEY WEAR WIGS?

The people of Colobane are dressed in rice bags. They are hungry; they are ready to eat Dramaan Dramah. 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 they have given themselves the right 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.

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.

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, images—arise from this dynamic; they are never separated. So costume is not an ornament, it is the reflection of a situation. In *Hyenas*, 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.

YOU'VE SAID THAT POWER AND MADNESS ARE RECURRENT THEMES IN HYENAS, AS IN YOUR OTHER FILMS. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

I do not have a good 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.

IF HUMANS ARE TOYS, THEN WHAT ABOUT ANIMALS? WHY ARE YOU OBSESSED WITH HYENAS?

The hyena is an African animal—you know that. It never kills. The hyena is feline, 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 see daylight, he is afraid of daylight, he is afraid of 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 *Hyenas*, 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 lotto tickets. And he manages to hold on because he has the power of gambling. In *La petite vendeuse de soleï* [The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun], all the protagonist wants is to sell her magazines, but money comes to subvert her plan. A rich man comes to sell 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*, 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.

IT'S QUITE REMARKABLE THAT YOU'VE NEVER USED THE SAME ACTOR TWICE IN THE 25 YEARS YOU'VE BEEN MAKING FILMS. YOU DON'T USE PROFESSIONAL ACTORS AT ALL, AND YET IN YOUR FILMS, EVERYONE ACTS LIKE A PROFESSIONAL...

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 "gotten 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 *Hyenas*, if you want to know where Dramaan Dramah'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.

DO YOU THINK THE AFRICAN FILM INDUSTRY IS CAPABLE OF SUSTAINING ITSELF IN THE FUTURE?

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 national 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.

WHAT ABOUT THE SILENT FILMS, BEFORE THE TALKIES?

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

ARE YOU REFERRING TO THE QUALITY OF FILM?

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.

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.

I am all for the quality of things—the total quality. As I said more than 20 years ago, for the educated African, Chinese, or Japanese, nothing authorizes low mediocrity.

DO YOU SEE ANY POSSIBILITIES FOR CO-PRODUCTIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES? YOU MADE HYENAS WITH THELMA FILMS IN SWITZERLAND, FOR EXAMPLE.

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.

WHENEVER I GO TO PESAPACO, 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?

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.

WHAT ARE YOUR OWN FUTURE PROJECTS?

I will make the third part of the trilogy about ordinary people. After that, I will make *Malika*, the third part of the trilogy about the power of craziness. The first two were *Touki Bouki* and *Hyenas*. Then I will consult God about the state of the world. ♣

THE LITTLE GIRL WHO SOLD THE SUN

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