

Reign of the Hyenas: The Dark Satire of Djibril Diop Mambéty

Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas*, 1992/2018. Photo courtesy Metrograph Pictures.

“The hyena is an animal of Africa. Singularly wild. It practically almost never kills. First cousin to the vulture. It knows how to sniff out illness in others. And then is capable of following, for a whole season, a sick lion. From a distance. Across the Sahel. To feast one evening on its corpse. Peacefully.” — Djibril Diop Mambéty

Hyenas (1992), Djibril Diop Mambéty's biting satire of postcolonial dreams, tells the story of a former sex worker returning to an economically devastated village and her sinister plot for revenge against a past lover. Njeri Githire, associate professor of African American & African Studies at the University of Minnesota, writes on Mambéty's 30-year filmic career, which criticized neocolonialist structures, capitalist society, and consumer culture.

Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas*, newly restored in 4K, is inspired by Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt's tragicomedy *The Visit* (1956). To be sure, the varied adaptations of Dürrenmatt's satirical play—which include the 1964 international coproduction, starring Ingrid Bergman

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and Anthony Quinn—are testament to the play’s popularity and the timeless relevance of its message. Mambéty’s special genius lay in his ability to adapt the much-renowned European play to an African setting, imbuing it with local resonance and aesthetic expression. The film’s riveting power flows as much from its reliance on African oral traditions and modes of communication as from the regularly recurring animal and natural themes which underpin the film’s moral and emotional conflict.

Adhering closely to the plot of Dürrenmatt’s play, *Hyenas* follows the return to Colobane of a superbly wealthy widow, after a 30-year absence.

Resplendently adorned and accompanied by a colorful, regal entourage, Linguère Ramatou (Ami Diakhate) has returned to right an injustice committed against her and punish the perpetrator. As a beautiful and spirited but penniless 17-year old, she had been seduced and left pregnant by Dramaan Drameh (Mansour Diouf), then a young man from a higher social order. Bent on marrying a woman from a prestigious family, Drameh had conspired to have the paternity suit that Ramatou had filed against him thrown out, defaming her in the process and forcing her into exile. But neither the obstacles that she subsequently faced nor the remarkable encounters that would go on to alter her fate could quash Ramatou’s strong desire to vindicate her reputation and make Drameh suffer for what she had had to endure.

Returning to a transformed Colobane, now a parched expanse of dreary ruin following natural calamities and an economic crisis engineered by none other than Ramatou herself, the richly endowed widow offers to rescue the town from total collapse in exchange for Drameh’s life. The townsfolk object to the hideous proposal with wide-eyed gasps and pious protestations. Not even the critical state of their town’s economic fortunes could turn them into the monsters that such an act would entail, they respond. But as goods and products that entice them begin to flow into town, and new appliances appeal to a taste for modernity that is inherently at the center of the film’s critique, it becomes easier for them to find a rationale for Ramatou’s offer.



Photo courtesy Metrograph Pictures

Grounded on avowedly universal themes raised in the source text (betrayal, revenge, individual responsibility versus collective moral duty, the corruptibility of human nature, the weight of haunting pasts and secret guilt), *Hyenas* contains an underlying subtext that would become particularly discernible in Mambéty's later works. Already subtly implied in Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973)—considered one of African cinema's greatest technical and artistic achievements—the corruption of money, power, and influence firmly rooted in neocolonial economic and institutional structures, compromised Africa's ability to forge its future path. Indeed, the dream of an alluring elsewhere that ensnares *Touki Bouki*'s pair of lovers in increasingly wild and dubious schemes reflects both the glee and pitfalls of blind consumerism, internalized colonialism, and acquiescence. Released in English under the title *The Journey of the Hyena*, *Touki Bouki*'s New Wave evocations earned Mambéty accolades and immense critical attention abroad. Mambéty has, in fact, stated in interviews that he imagined the two “hyena” features as part of trilogy, whose third component never saw the light of day.



Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas*, 1992/2018. Photo courtesy Metrograph Pictures

Born and raised in Colobane, on the outskirts of the capital city Dakar, Mambéty garnered much critical attention throughout the course of his three-decade filmic output, which comprised of the two features and five short-length films. The innovation, uniqueness, and fine quality of his work all gave the promise of a dazzling career, prematurely cut short by death from lung cancer in 1998, when he was 53. His two last shorts, which followed *Hyenas*, enlarged on the themes of money's corrupting effects, the lure of consumption, and ever-encroaching neocolonial structures to explore questions of economic disparity, widespread poverty, and squalor in urban Dakar. Here, too, Mambéty had imagined a trilogy whose last component would remain unfulfilled.

But even as he used film as a platform for political communication, Mambéty deftly refrained from explicitly didactic art. The moral dilemma that pervades *Hyenas* is, for instance, accented by a blurring of the lines between victims and oppressors. Secure in her island-citadel, Linguère Ramatou anticipates the onset of "the reign of the hyenas," confident in her resources (greater than those of "the World Bank") and in their capacity to eventually sway the townsfolk. In evoking an institution whose policies, like those of the IMF, would come to engulf African nations in pervasive economic turmoil and catastrophic social crises under the guise of financial assistance, Mambéty puts a grim spin on the changes that begin to slowly transfigure the social and spatial realities of Colobane.

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