

Notebook Feature

Djibril Diop Mambéty's Mesmerizing Anti-Neocolonial Masterpiece "Hyenas"

The Senegalese director's allegory about the destructive effect of global financial powers on society's morality has been newly restored.

Lalya Gaye • 26 APR 2019



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

In more ways than one, Senegal is exactly like Iceland. Everyone is connected. All the Icelandic people I have ever met somehow know each other from high school, and have had some connection to Björk, like bringing their children to the same swimming pool as hers or being a distant relative. Every Icelander also has written and published a book—or so it seems. Similarly, if you are Senegalese, every single one of your compatriots somehow is your distant cousin. If not, then you will have to spend all the time it will take to figure out how you are related, even if you have to go back several generations to find that link. This is because so much of Senegalese culture is about bonding with people like siblings, and looking out for one another, even when you seemingly have nothing in common. Just like Iceland, Senegal also has beautiful landscapes, an impeccable sense of style, and an incredible amount of internationally renowned talent for such a small country; from fashion designers to sculptors, authors, chefs, and musicians (disclaimer: proud Senegalese here). One of the things we are most proud of is our filmmaking heritage, and Djibril Diop Mambéty—like Ousmane Sambène who is often called the father of African cinema—is basically a cultural institution. His films long and short are proper classics that inspire us and others to this day, among others Beyoncé and Jay-Z who appropriated a famous image from DDM's 1973 first feature film, *Touki Bouki*. The one with the couple on the horned motorcycle. You know the one.

DDM's second feature, made almost twenty years after *Touki Bouki*, was the 1992 dark comedy *Hyenas*, a masterpiece which has recently been restored. It was meant to be part of a trilogy but DDM sadly passed away before a third opus, in 1998. Now, DDM's niece, the young and talented director Mati Diop, has taken on the family legacy with a number of excellent short films, and is competing at Cannes Film Festival this year with her first feature *Atlantiques*, twenty-seven years after her uncle did with *Hyenas*. She is the first black woman to ever compete as a director at Cannes. Go Mati!

As I was one of the very few Senegalese people living in Northern England at the time (like seriously, where is everyone??), I had the honor last fall of introducing *Hyenas* at Berwick Film Festival, at the English-Scottish border. And I had the delightful surprise of also suddenly realizing that my 2nd-degree cousin Oumou Sy was the one who made the costumes for this movie. How more Senegalese can this get?

But I digress.

Born in 1945, DDM was from my father's generation, the one that lived through colonialism, fought for the country's liberation, and witnessed the grip of neocolonialism strangle our newly independent countries. By the early 1990s when DDM directed this film, his post-independent optimism had long disappeared. He had become deeply pessimistic, not just about Africa but about humanity as a whole, whose sense of morality he considered had become corrupted by the lure of money.

Hyenas is based on the 1955 Swiss play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (English title: "The Visit") by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, an equally pessimistic satire of the corruptibility of the Swiss voting system and direct democracy. In this play, an old lady comes back to the village from which she had been kicked out as a girl. She is now rich, powerful, and has a voice to be reckoned with—in a country where some women still did not get to vote until 1990. She also has a disturbing proposal to offer the greedy village inhabitants...

This is not the first adaptation of this story. Ingrid Bergman and Anthony Quinn starred in one they co-produced in 1964 for instance, in which the question of women's suffrage was at the forefront. But DDM's take on this story uniquely reflects his perspective of the world. The rich old lady, the corrupted villagers: all present. But it's also an allegory for neocolonialism, neoliberalism, consumerism, and the destructive effect of these -isms on the fabric of society. Interviewed about this film, DDM stated the following: "My task was to identify the enemy of humankind: money, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank."

Other more recent masterpieces such as Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006) and Ken Loach's *Daniel Blake* (2016) have since touched on similar themes of people vs. neoliberalism. The former literally puts the World Bank on trial and the latter tells the story of a man crushed by the greedy doctrine of so-called "austerity." Kang Hyeon-cheol's brilliant *Swing Kids* (2018), about a group of people's struggle to maintain their humanity in the face of soul-destroying forces (albeit with more earnest resolve than the comically rather easily-corruptible characters in *Hyenas*), also comes to mind.

With *Hyenas*, DDM took on his ambitious mission in the style of African magic realism, transporting the story into an imaginary version of the very real Senegalese area of Colobane. One with elements of Senegal, of course, but also of the wider African continent, of Europe and even Japan. The villagers pride themselves on their strong bond, Senegalese-style, but this bond progressively disintegrates when faced with the poisoned proposal. The old lady's amputated limbs are now made of gold—this coveted material that once made West Africa so rich but also turned it into a prey for international greed. She is "richer than the World Bank." The resulting film, also thanks to its beautiful costumes full of symbolism (go Oumou!) and surrealistic decors, is mesmerizing.

As it happens, on the same day that *Hyenas* was screened in Berwick, the news came in that the actual real-life fishing area of Colobane had run out of fish. Its waters, once the most fish-dense in the world, overexploited by international fishing companies. And so the question that DDM asked back in 1992 with *Hyenas* still lingers: When money replaces morality, can development really happen?

A new restoration of Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas* opens April 26, 2019 at the Metrograph in New York.

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