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OUSMANE SEMBENE -- MANDABI*MANDABI (Senegal-France)**Written and Directed by Ousmane Sembene**Produced by Domireve (Dakar) and C.F.F.P. (Paris)**Mamadou Gueye Ibrahim Dieng**Soringo Sow Maissa**Ynousse N'Diaye First Wife**Moustapha Toure Shopkeeper**Issa Niang Second Wife**Modoun Faye Mailman**Serigne N'Diaye Imam**Moussa Diouf Nephew**Christophe M'Doulabia Water Seller**Producer: Jean Maumy**Script: Ousmane Sembene from the story by L.S. Senghor**Photography: Paul Soullignac**Editor: Bernard Lefebvre**Sound: Henri Moline**90 minutes, Eastmancolor. Wolof with English subtitles.**Mandabi has been shown at the 1968 Venice Film Festival, 1969 New York Film Festival, 1969 San Francisco International Film Festival, and 1969 London Film Festival.*

Ousmane Sembene, director of MANDABI, was a fisherman who left Senegal for Marseilles to join the French army in 1944. He became a dockworker, a union leader, a political militant, an organizer of African students (although he has never been a student himself). He started writing his first novels before going back to Africa. He is now Africa's most important filmmaker. He has made several documentaries including 'La Noire de...' which won the Prix Jean Vigo at Cannes in 1967.

At the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, after the projection of MANDABI, Sembene said at a press conference: "What interests me is to expose the problems which confront my people. I consider the cinema as a means of political action. Nevertheless, I do not want to make a 'cinema de pancartes' (billboard cinema). The revolutionary cinema is something else.--On the other hand I'm not naive to the point of thinking that I can change the Senegalese reality with just one movie. But I believe that if there were a group of us shooting movies with the same political orientation, we would be able to modify this reality a little bit. We have created here a Pan-african union of filmmakers. That's good. But there will be all sorts of people in it. Therefore I also believe that it would be a good thing to organize a re-grouping of filmmakers who share the same convictions. In the way the Brazilians have done with 'Cinema Novo', for example. Because one of these days we too will have to deal with censorship. Let us begin to form a pressure group right now. Another thing, in some countries people are satisfied with attacking the old colonialism and they 'forget' to denounce the neo-colonialism and its accomplice, the new African bourgeoisie."

The recent Pan-african Festival in Algiers has shown that there are young African directors perfectly aware of the particular problems which in every country of the continent are waiting only for material means to be expressed through the film medium. They are united by a common will to put this art at the service of an analysis of a cultural unity that has been strangled by colonization, and to turn film making into a weapon and a means for the promotion of political unity.

The Egyptian cinema, which started around 1930, is the only African cinema that has the capacity for an industrial production and a vast distribution network in Africa, Asia and among the Libanese of Latin America.

Since 1960 other African cinemas have arisen, in the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Lybia), in French-speaking Africa (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Guinea, etc.), non French-speaking Africa, and the so-called 'Pale Africa' (Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Rhodesia, South Africa).

Morocco has produced mainly short documentaries: the whole production has been stifled by censorship. Tunisia has opened up new paths in filmmaking. The Algerian cinema is the most dynamic of the whole continent and the best of the Arabic world.

About non-French-speaking Africa we have little information, many of these countries have not yet produced a single film. Very little has also been produced in 'Pale Africa'.

In French-speaking Africa Guinea is the only country which has some film laboratories, but so far has had very little production.

Senegal has led the way and was the first one to make movies; it also has the largest and best known group of film directors: Sembene, Vieyra, Thiam, Samb, Diagne, Diop, Traore, Blaise Senghor, etc.

We can't talk about French African cinema without denouncing the cause of most of its difficulties: the continuing monopolization and exploitation by two French film distribution companies, SECMA and COMACICO. Only Guinea has so far tried to fight its exorbitant privileges. The first company owns 60 movie theatres, the second 85. The African owners of the remaining 55 are moreover forced to pass through one or the other of these companies to obtain their films. (There are on the whole continent 2,500 theatres of which only 220 are in French-speaking Africa).

It's again Sembene who has publicly accused them, and also added: "Our cinema cannot and must not depend forever on the goodwill of some French milieux. First because they may have surprises in store for us. Secondly because it is not natural. All this takes us back to the general problem of neocolonialism, a situation in which we live with the complicity of our governments. We are trapped in a net of contradictions. We have to do the best we can and between two contradictions choose the minor one. I take money where I find it. I am ready to ally myself with the devil in order to make films, but I will not renounce any of my political convictions."

It is very remarkable that no authentic Black African film has ever touched on folklore. As Sembene says: "We have had enough of feathers and tam-tams."

The inspiration of these filmmakers pivots around a few major themes: the alienation of a great number of workers or students who go to Paris for better jobs or a higher education and become estranged from Africa; the return to the native country and the consequent difficulties of readjustment; the clash between tradition and progress with all its implications; and the collusion between the reality of the new administration and the ideals of independence.

It is particularly Ousmane Sembene (once more!) who describes in *LA NOIRE DE...* and *MANDABI* the dictatorship of this new bureaucratic elite over the illiterate majority. He talks about Senegal but such is the case also for many of the other countries

Julius Lester gives a comprehensive summary of the situation in an article on *MANDABI*:

"Dakar is the capital of Senegal. It is a city with slums which compare with the worst of Chicago's or Philadelphia's, and in 1967 it had the highest prices in the world, followed by Paris and New York. During colonialism, it was the center from which all of France's interests in Africa were looked after. It was the black Paris (as Hanoi was the Asian one). It was a well-to-do city then, because French soldiers put money into the economy; the civil servants and bureaucrats who looked after France's African interests from their desks in Dakar put money into the economy. When France granted Senegal its independence in 1960, it did not, of course, return the country to the state it had been before France had come. It merely watched as the tri-color was lowered from flag-poles and smiled as the new flag ascended to flutter in illusory winds of independence. France left the city of Dakar with 10,000 civil servants who at present drain \$520 million a year from the economy, civil servants which France needed for its colonies, but who are useless for Senegal. The industries in Dakar which had serviced all the French colonies could now only service Senegal, and thus, they were a wasteful extravagance, as well as a source of lost revenues. And with independence, Senegalese markets contracted as the French closed their bases. The economy of the French federation had been to France's benefit. Senegal's chief crop was peanuts. It also supplied soldiers for the French army (some 280,000 fought in World War I, as well as in Vietnam up to Dien Bien Phu). Because Senegal was part of a federation, its other needs were supplied by the other members of the federation. After independence, Senegal had to furnish all its own needs, as did Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, and the other French colonies. (An attempt was made to re-structure the federation after independence, but the political differences between the new countries, particularly Senegal, Mali, and Guinea, were too great.)

Senegal, like the rest of Africa, has not yet recovered from another experience it suffered at the hands of the West--the slave trade. Senghor considers the loss of 200 million people to be a worse catastrophe to Africa than colonialism. "What civilization," he asks, "would have been able to resist such a hemorrhage?" Imagine, if you can, the entire population of the United States being transported across the ocean to China. Perhaps that will give you some idea of the proportions of African slave trade and its impact on Africa. (Two hundred million people. Count them and maybe you'll understand why blacks are not sent into paroxysms of agony for six million Jews. ...)

The slave trade, then colonialism, and now, neo-colonialism. The white man is no longer seen ruling Africa today, but he has merely learned the advantage of ruling from behind a black mask. The problems faced by the "emerging nations" (emerging from the predatory claws of the West) seem almost insurmountable. "

"It is good to see Africa honestly presented through the eyes of a black African. The film destroys the myths and fantasies which we involuntary exiles cannot help but create. We confront ourselves in a manner more intense than if we were actually there; thus, art fulfills its function. I came away from the confrontation with a deeper feeling for the motherland and more intense hatred for what had been done to it. Of course, hatred will not solve the problems of Ibrahim. Nonetheless, the hatred will be my energy, when my commitment finds itself a little tired.

I am not sure what the film can mean to whites. If they see it and get Tarzan out of their minds, that will be enough. Of course, many, if not most, will contend that the film could just as easily be about white people and that, in actuality, the film is proof of the commonness of man's experience (man's experience as produced and directed by Western civilization). MANDABI is universal, I can hear the liberals telling me. Of course it is, which is not the point at all. Nor does it have anything to do with the film. All too often people invoke the universality in art so they can avoid having to confront the particulars of life, of which art is merely an expression and interpretation. It is the particulars of MANDABI which make it a first-rate film. And MANDABI must be experienced in its particulars. This, of course, calls for honesty from the viewer."

...Julius Lester--MANDABI: Confronting Africa

"...As a comedy dealing with life's miseries, (MANDABI) displays a controlled sophistication in the telling that gives it a feeling of almost classic directness and simplicity. What Sembene does not make his camera do means more than what many virtuoso directors do make their cameras do...Sembene's approach is spare, laconic, slightly ironic, and never patronizing. Like many good directors, he displays a reticence toward his characters that grants him freedom from explicit moral judgement and allows them a quality of personal wholeness that is perhaps more important to the movies than great performance. Because his hero, Dieng (played by Mamadou Gueye, brilliantly and without undue complications), must change in our eyes without changing very much in his character, such wholeness is crucial to the movement of the film... Dieng's misfortunes, like the rooms, courtyards, and streets so unassumingly explored by Sembene's camera, belong to the ordinary continuum of experience. Because they are the products of a universal trickery, like fate, they cannot be approved. In this small distinction lies the style and the hope of the film."

...Roger Greenspun, The New York Times

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