Document Citation

Title	**Mandabi: Confronting Africa**
Author(s)	Julius Lester
Source	*Grove Press International Film Festival*
Date	1973
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	23-27, 74-78
No. of Pages	10
Subjects	Sembène, Ousmane (1923), Zinguinchor-Casamance, Senegal
Film Subjects	Mandabi (The money order), Sembène, Ousmane, 1968

MANDABI: CONFRONTING AFRICA

Grove Press International Film Festival Book, 1973, Grove Press

by Julius Lester

"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... We see a total Africa—the old which has been made a victim and the victim beginning to fight back..."

Africa! The name conjures up only the vaguest images. The mere sound of Paris, London, and Rome evoke images of sweetness, light, and culture, if not of the height of civilization itself. Tell your friends that you just got back from Paris and your status is increased by their envy. Tell them that you just returned from Addis Ababa, Kampala, or Dakar, and they will try to manage an appreciative "Ooooh!," while trying to figure where you've been and what the hell you could've been doing there.

Africa! The white man called it the "Dark Continent," a phrase that was not so much descriptive of its inhabitants, but of the white man's state of mind. Africa! Naked savages, who had no written language, who believed in voodoo and witch doctors, who lived in jungles and carried spears. It was primitive and ignorant, so the white man came to bring light, a white liberal euphemism for colonialism, which is a white liberal political euphemism for thievery. ("When the white man came to Africa," Stokely Carmichael is fond of saying, "we had the land and they had the Bible. Now, we have the Bible and they have the land.")

For American blacks, Africa was a place to be ashamed of until recently. After all, where could we learn of Africa except from Tarzan movies in which Cheetah was made to show more intelligence than the natives. Some blacks hated themselves so much that they went to the movies and cheered for Tarzan to "kill them niggers!" Others went and laughed uncomfortably, not wanting to believe the reflection of themselves they saw on the screen, but not knowing how to counter it. And some of us never went, not wanting to be humiliated. (I've only seen one Tarzan movie and that was *Tarzan and the Nazis,* high camp at its highest. I must confess, however, that I rooted for the Nazis.)

A few blacks looked upon Africa as the homeland. Men like W.E.B. Du Bois and Leo Hansberry and J. A. Rogers knew that Africa had once been the site of great civilizations and was the center of learning in the ancient world. Marcus Garvey was the first to bring a positive consciousness of Africa to masses of American blacks. At best, however, it was difficult for any black to feel for Africa what an Irish-American, for example, felt for Ireland. What could we know of Africa? Few of us had ever been there, nor did we live among people who had come from there and remembered it. And where the Irish-American could write and visit his cousin in County Cork, I only knew that, yes, somewhere in Africa, I had cousins and uncles and half-brothers and sisters, people whose blood I shared in the most personal way and I could never know them, for I did not know my name. Only that of my slave-owner. And even if I were able to locate them through some miracle of the gods, we could only stare at each other, unable to exchange one word. Unlike the young Jews of today who can repudiate Yiddish and Hebrew, I cannot repudiate what I never knew. Thus, I am effectively cut off from ever, ever, ever knowing my past. To feel that I have no country which will protect me is bad enough, but to feel that I have no past is, perhaps, the central crisis in the lives of all blacks who live outside Africa. Who am I? The only definite historical answer can be found on a bill of sale.

This is not to say that if I knew my historical past all problems would be solved. Perhaps I would be so ashamed of it that I would deny it, or so indifferent that I would let it slip away, or I might even find that I had no need

Jerry Fremuth

of it. But, I have no choice in the matter. My past was deliberately destroyed. Therefore, I must recreate what I can and create what I must. I must, in other words, create my historical self, because a man without a history exists to himself only in what others tell him. If I am to be a man, only I can tell myself who I am.

A change in the attitude of American blacks to Africa began in the late fifties. For many of us it began with the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya. I was a teenager then and had little idea of the political implications of what was happening in Kenya and in the papers of Nashville, Tennessee, all I learned was that black, ignorant savages were engaging in secret blood rites and swearing oaths and trying to kill white men, which was all the proof anybody needed that Africa was not ready to join the other civilized nations of the world (which had dropped atomic bombs on Japan, fire-bombed Dresden, napalmed Greece, and used germ warfare in Korea; no, Africa will never be as civilized as the West, I hope). That is what the papers wanted me to believe, but there is a vast difference between what a white man tells a black and what that black hears. What I heard was the first positive thing I'd ever heard about Africa. Niggers were killing white folks! Goddam! I fantasized about going to Africa and joining the Mau-Mau. I could see myself drinking the blood of my brothers and swearing all kinds of oaths, tipping my spears with the deadly poison of strange roots and sending them hurtling into some cracker's chest. *Thunk!* Goddam! That it never occured to me to throw some spears at the white people of Nashville (who were definitely not in short supply) is an indication of how futile I felt it was to fight here. We were outnumbered. But in Africa! In Africa! Wasn't no way we could lose. (Little did I know.) My fantasies were short-lived, for the Mau-Mau were short-lived. Nonetheless, I had been awakened to an Africa that was trying to kick Tarzan's ass (though the disposition of Jane's remains in question) and that was enough. For the first time, I was not uncomfortable with the word "Africa."

In the late fifties and early sixties, the French and English colonies in Africa were given their independence and blacks in America began to take an interest in what happened there. Our present was no longer inhabited by savages who embarrassed us, but by United Nation diplomats and rulers


Mamadou Guye

of nations – Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor (who, incidentally, wrote the story of *Mandabi),* Touré, Kaunda, and, always, the Adam Clayton Powell of Africa, The Lion of Judah, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. (He was always the one positive black symbol in the pre-Black Power days of my youth – proud, defiant, flamboyant – and how I loved the stories about the two lions who walked unchained on the grounds of his palace, which had to be chained the day Princess Margaret came because she was afraid of them. Even now, when I know that he is nothing more than a repressive feudal lord, I still thank him for the positive black image he presented to me. He was the Lion of Judah and carried himself with such dignity and pride that you believed. After all, in 1200 A.D. Paris was a little country town, with wolves roaming through the streets after sunset. In 1200 A.D., Ethiopia had been a nation for a millenium. Selassie traces his lineage back to the Queen of Sheba. God bless the Lion of Judah, tyrant though he be.)

In 1964, Malcolm visited Africa and for the first time since Garvey, a link was built between Africa and its homeless children. In 1966, Black Power exploded in our minds and we were no longer Americans. We were Afro-Americans, African-Americans, Africans-in-Exile, Overseas Africans, and just plain black. We destroyed our slave owners' names and christened ourselves Askia, Chaka, Muhammud, Abdul, and Masai. We no longer brushed our hair down but combed it up. The women no longer had their curls straightened with hot irons, but shaped those curls into full, luxuriant crowns. We transformed brightly colored bolts of cloth into robes and turbans and daishikis (though we didn't take off our shades).

Africa, which had been a nightmare in our minds, became the material of which dreams are made. We began reading about the empires of Songhai, Mali, and Ghana, about the Yorubas and Ashanti, about Benin and other countries of ancient Africa. We had a past, one of which we *could* be proud, one that rivalled Europe in accomplishment and learning. (Did you know that iron was first discovered and used in Africa?) And when anthropologists could no longer avoid saying publicly that civilization had its beginnings in the African interior, we laughed with delight at the white man's discomfiture and with contentment at finally being vindicated.

Some blacks contended that not only did Africa have a glorious past, it represented a superior civilization. LeRoi Jones changed his name to Ameer Baraka and became a Sufi Moslem priest, who said his prayers, bowing toward Mecca, and learned Arabic. To him and many blacks, the white man had only existed to reveal the depths of evil of which man was capable. Having done that, it was now time for him to pass from the face of the earth and let the Garden of Eden return. The very presence of the white man on the planet had become an unbearable insult to the rest of humanity.

Blacks began to visit Africa in the late sixties. The feeling began to grow that you had to go to the homeland, as the Moslem wants to see Mecca before he dies, and I know that I cannot die without once seeing the homeland, without standing on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in West Africa from whence my ancestors set sail when they were transplanted across the world. (The ability to transplant hearts is really no great accomplishment. Blacks are the only people in the history of Man to have been transplanted, en masse, from one continent to another. Two hundred million people taken bodily across the Atlantic Ocean; and it is their ancestors who now stretch from Tierra del Fuego through Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, into the United States and Canada. And, as Charles Darwin has aptly pointed out, only the strong survive. We, whom you see everyday, are the direct descendants of Africa's strongest, the descendants of the only people transplant in the history of the world. And you ask why we're angry?)

Some who returned to the homeland have stayed. And it's no wonder. It must be amazing to be in a country and everywhere you look, black people, and everything to be done is being done by black people. You get on a plane and the pilot, co-pilot, and stewardesses are black. The airplane mechanics are black. You go into a bank, any bank, and the tellers and bank president are black (though the president is probably on the phone getting his orders from Paris or London). I cannot imagine what it must be like not to be subjected every day to white people. Not to have to explain, or be

MANDABI (Senegal-France)
Written and Directed by Ousmane Sembene
Produced by Domireve (Dakar) and C.F.F.P. (Paris)

Mamadou Guye *Ibrahim Dieng*
Ynousse N'Diaye *First Wife*
Issa Niang *Second Wife*
Serigne N'Diayes *Imam*
Sorigno Sow *Maissa*
Moustapha Toure *Shopkeeper*
Modoun Faye *Mailman*
Moussa Diouf *Nephew*
Christophe M'Doulabia *Water Seller*

Producer: Jean Maumy
Script: Ousmane Sembene from the story by L. S. Senghor
Photography: Paul Soulignac
Editor: Bernard Lefebre
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.


Moustapha Toure


Issa Niang

defensive, or watch out, 'cause this is one of them slick intellectual whiteys, or this is one of them sincere, well-meaning whiteys, or this is just a downright nigger-hating honky. To spend a whole day and not be put through any changes from white people! Wow! Not to have to wonder if that cab passed me because I'm black. In Africa, no problem. That cab passed me because the driver is a no-good bastard.

To be relieved of the burden which whites have made of my blackness. That is what Africa means to a lot of us. To have that burden lifted and just lay back and be my black self. I could be arrogant black if I wanted to, or stupid black, or nigger evil black, or exuberant black. I could change everyday for a while, just to see what all the different kinds of black felt like. After I went through that period I could just be me-black. But as long as I'm in the white world, part of me, if not all, has to be a white-folks-fighting black, which is tiresome, aggravating and should be downright unnecessary. Life is defined as a struggle with white people and that's not what I call living (though we do OK at it). To many American blacks, Africa means a new definition of life.

Others who have gone to Africa have had the disquieting experience of feeling that they had not come home, but merely to a foreign country. Richard Wright in his book on Ghana, *Black Power,* felt that. He looked at Africans and wondered which one's great-grandfather had sold his into slavery. He loved Africa, but he was an alien there. To what degree can a transplanted, miscegenated African go home? The Africa which exists in our mind may have little relationship to the Africa we will see in our eyes. Indeed, blacks in America are in great danger of creating a mythology of Africa which will make it impossible to comprehend the reality. But we need that myth right now, that myth of empires whose streets were paved with gold. So many of us need to create a fantasy world to combat the white man's Golden Age of Greece fantasy and his Italian Renaissance fantasy and Age of Reason fantasy which we were forced to study in Western Civilization classes. ("I think; therefore I am," the teacher said, glowing as he read it. It summed up the best and worst of Western civilization. Thinking has nothing to do with being. I think; therefore I think. That's where that's at. The question is, how do you live?) So we have created in our minds an Africa which cannot live up to our fantasies, and for many of us, it is shattering to go to Nigeria and see "Bonanza" and "Cowboy in Africa" on television. We go to Africa and realize the cold realism of Fanon's words: "All the proofs of a wonderful Songhai civilization will not change the fact that today the Songhais are underfed and illiterate, thrown between sky and water with empty heads and empty eyes."

Africa does not exist merely as raw material for our fantasies. It exists in and of itself. When some of us realize that, we find that we are little more than Americans visiting Africa. In many instances, Africans look upon us as Americans. Black, yes, but black Americans. Others, however, such as Nkrumah, see us as another tribe, a far-flung tribe, captives of war, who are returning, and some of the masses share this feeling. A friend of mine visited a village in Ghana and when asked by the chief where she was from, replied, "The United States." He asked her to tell him about her country and when she finished, he looked at her in amazement. "We have heard stories about our people who were taken across the waters, but I did not believe them until today." And she was received as what she was – a member of the tribe who had come home.

Whether or not Africa becomes an actual homeland and not merely a psychic one depends on Africa and whether the consciousness of the African people will be tribal, national, or Pan-Africanist. Blacks in the West are Pan-Africans, because they have no home in the Western world. Thus, they feel a unity with all non-whites. But whether that feeling of unity will be reciprocated by Africa is a question for the future. The African has his tribe and his country. He does not feel the same urgent need to be a Pan-Africanist as the American black. Indeed, he is not as intensely anti-white, if he is anti-white at all. After all, it is his country and he is a majority in it. Israel gives automatic citizenship to

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR MANDABI

"Writer Ousmane Sembene has already been noticed at European film fests via a prizewinning short on his country before independence, and a feature, *La Noire de* . . . , which was in Cannes Fest Critic Section last year (1968) and showed a revelatory feeling in dealing with African, European, and colonialist thinking. His second feature *(Mandabi)* is a true African pic, mirroring everyday problems in the witty guise of a folksy tale of a man caught up in red tape and bureaucracy . . . his film has a tangy national feel that is eminently local, yet international in its theme, treatment, and statement...It makes points with graceful insights, inventive scenes and pertinent playing . . . Technically excellent, it shows that Africa is now beginning to speak filmically and may be heard from at other fests as other filmmakers assimilate their lessons and comment on their countries . . ."—Gene Moskowitz, *Variety*

". . . As a comedy dealing with life's miseries, it 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 judgment 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 Guye, 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 avoided. But they need not be approved. In this small distinction lies the style and the hope of the film."—Roger Greenspun, *The New York Times*

". . . What we saw went far beyond anyone's expectations — a wonderful, handsome, and *real* comedy . . . We had seen what we were always looking for — a new film master and a new kind of film. It lifted the whole festival — here was the masterpiece that could justify any film festival . . . None of Sembene's three films could have been made by any visitor to Senegal. Nor could they have been made in any other African country. But they teach that continent a lesson of vital importance: do it yourself and in your own way. Filmmakers in the black communities . . . should study the deep individuality of Sembene's films."—Jay Leyda, *Kino*

any Jew (except black Jews from Chicago, it seems). Africa must one day confront the same issue. But, as of now, it has too many problems which are more immediate and pressing. It does not reject black Americans who come home; but it does not roll out the red carpet, either.

The black American in Africa confronts his blackness in a new way, for it is thrown into bas relief, not by whiteness, but by the complexities of Africa. We think of Africa as if it were a unity. It is not. It is a continent (the second largest) of separate nations, artificial, white-man-made nations, which were created by colonialism for the convenience of dividing up the spoils. The press defines Africa's problems in terms of tribalism. No. Nigeria was at war because it was only a nation in the eyes of Britain for the convenience of Britain. It is a country with Arabs in the North, Ibos in the West, and Christians in the central regions. The current Nigerian government was at war to make the country into a nation, trying to weld its disparate parts into some kind of whole, to get its various tribes and religions to live together under a central political authority. Whether or not Nigeria, or any other African nation, wants to accept the definition of nation imposed on it by colonialism is almost a moot question. The complexities of international economics, as well as the presence of neo-colonialism on the continent, precludes any other course at the moment.

The concept of a nation as a political unit is very new in Africa. The basic unit has always been the tribe and one of the first problems of black African governments is how to get tribes and members of tribes to identify more with the nation than the tribe. An African is an abstraction. A Kikuyu is not. A Kenyan may or may not be an abstraction, depending on the political consciousness of the Kikuyu. Blackness has little or no meaning, except in those countries where whites either dominate or are close enough to spell a danger — Rhodesia, South Africa, Botswana, Southeast Africa, Zambia, Tanzania. Blackness as a concept with intrinsic values seems to rise in worth the closer its proximity to whiteness.

Thus, when the American black confronts Africa, he confronts a people who are struggling to know their identity, and their struggle is not a simple black-white question. In fact, it can be exceedingly complex, particularly if you live in one of the large cities. This is where the concepts of race and nation and tribe and religion co-exist and provide the context for the lives of the individuals. It is where Africa confronts its own cultural past and present, the vestiges of colonialism, and the actuality of neo-colonialism.

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 in 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 the illusory winds of independence. France left the city of Dakar with 10,000 civil servants who presently 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 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

. . . . . *continued on page 74* ➟

Confronting Africa
continued from page 27

all of 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 the African slave trade and its impact on Africa. (Two hundred million people. Count them and then maybe you'll understand why blacks are not sent into paroxysms of agony for six million Jews. When Jews and other whites become as indignant over 200 million black people taken from a continent, a significant number of whom did not survive the Middle Passage, and pound it into the heads of people as Hitler's attempted genocide has been impressed upon the world, then we will not feel insulted when Jews talk about the six million. When you cry for our 200 million, we will weep for your millions, who number more than six million in the centuries of pogroms Jews have suffered. For right now, I must remember the 200 million. Everyone else has forgotten, or considers it of little or no consequence. I sincerely hope that you understand why my tears are reserved for black humanity.)

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 a wonder that there have not been more conflicts like Congo-Katanga, Nigeria-Biafra.

This is the political-economic environment against which many Africans must lead their lives today. French-speaking Africa has not had the violent upheavals of the former Belgian colony or of the former English colony, Kenya. Senegal, in particular, remains closely tied to France as it attempts to become a nation. It is a difficult process. There are many tribes, each speaking a different tongue. The schools, those which exist, are modelled after French ones. French is the official language. But it is spoken by less than ten per cent of the population. How do you begin to educate the masses of people to the problems? How do you begin to explain to them the increasing complexity of their lives? This is not the place to even attempt an answer to those questions. Indeed, the questions are only raised to try and give some indication of the enormity of the problems to be dealt with. Perhaps the strangest part of it all is that while this situation exists, people are leading their lives each and every day and it is in those lives that one finds the actual history of the nation, in the individual lives of people who do some things and have a lot of things done to them as they traverse the space which stretches from birth to death.

Ibrahim Dieng is one of those people. He is sitting in a square in Dakar. His skin is black, a rich, luxurious black. He looks to be in his fifties, maybe sixties, and is having his head shaved with a straight razor. Behind him three black women walk slowly down the street, carrying bundles on their heads. Their long colorful robes reveal nothing of their bodies, but the gentle sway of their large hips cannot be hidden. Indeed, it was not meant to be, for the robes emphasize the sensuality of their movements. Ibrahim does not notice. The barber places the straight razor inside Ibrahim's nostrils and swiftly, but gently, cleans the hair from them. Ibrahim does not flinch. When it is over, he picks at each nostril, sniffs, looks at himself in the small mirror, and without a word, pays the barber. Getting up, he walks away, stolidly and with great dignity.

As a person, Ibrahim is no better or worse than anybody else. He seems to take great pride in his physical person and although he is somewhat rotund, he still manages to present a fine image to the world. He has good reason to. He has not been able to find a job for four years and has two wives (he is a Moslem) and seven children to support. But one would not know of his poverty watching him in the streets. He looks like a prosperous merchant. He has retained his self-respect.

At home his wives treat him not like a man who is unable to support them, but like a king who daily bestows upon them the riches of Solomon. He enters the house, sits on the bed, and one of the wives removes his sandals, pours water into a pan and washes his feet. After they are dried, his meal is brought to him and in what has to be one of the great scenes in motion pictures, he proceeds to eat. The eating scenes of *Henry VIII, The Seventh Seal,* and *Tom Jones* pale by comparison. Here, there is no table laden with food, no drunken crowds of people, nor is the air heavy with sexuality. Here, there is one man, seated on the floor, his back against his bed. Between his legs is a large bowl of rice. He shovels the rice into his mouth with his hands, belches with great effort, runs his hands around the inside of the large bowl and shovels it in. Finally he finishes and one of his wives brings a bowl of water and he washes his hands and the inside of his mouth. Then he is brought fruit, which he devours quickly and greedily. Then he stretches out on his bed for a nap, and one of his wives massages his back and legs.

This is the prelude to the actual story, which is exquisite in its simplicity. Ibrahim receives a money order *(mandabi)* from his nephew who lives and works in Paris. Ibrahim tries to cash it. And it is there that the story begins, unfolding slowly and in painful detail. Those of us who have tried to cash a check at a bank where we didn't have an account or were not known realize as Ibrahim walks confidently into the post office that he will not get the money order cashed. But Ibrahim is not schooled in the ways of "civilization" as we are. He does not know that to cash a money order is to subject one's being to an all-out assault by the forces of civilization.

He walks into the post office and goes over to a young black man seated behind a desk. Hesitantly he hands the letter to the young man and it is then that we realize that Ibrahim cannot read, that in Senegal one can get a job reading mail to those whose sons, nephews, brothers, and cousins have left and gone to Paris. The reader takes the letter and begins to read it to Ibrahim. Suddenly we hear, not the voice of the reader, but that of the nephew and on the screen we see a young black man, dressed in pants and a heavy sweater, a stocking cap on his hand, leaning his long-handled street-sweeper's broom against the wall of a building, entering and mailing the letter which Ibrahim is now listening to. Then, we see the nephew leave, take his broom and return to the gutter and the Seine and those quaint little bridges arching it do

not look so romantic seen from the gutter. The boy tells his uncle that he is saying his prayers each day and remaining true to the Moslem faith. He is homesick and hopes to return one day but, as Uncle Dieng knows, there is no work in Senegal. He has saved five thousand francs, which is to be divided between Ibrahim, the boy's mother, and the rest to be deposited in a bank for the boy for when he returns.

Ibrahim smiles shyly when he finishes listening to the letter, but it is obvious that he has understood little of what the boy was saying and feeling. The reader, who has obviously read many letters like this and might have written a few himself, demands his payment and is only partly-mollified when Ibrahim tells him he will pay as soon as he receives the money for the *mandabi.*

The reader watches closely as Ibrahim goes to the window to cash the money order. The clerk asks Ibrahim for his *Carte d'identité.* Ibrahim, of course, does not have one and scarcely knows what it is. But he cannot get the money without it. The clerk tells him that the money order will be kept at the post office for two weeks, after which it will be returned to the sender.

Ibrahim starts to walk out of the post office when he is accosted by the reader, demanding his money. Insults are exchanged between the two, with Ibrahim using anger to cover his inability to understand why he should pay someone to read a letter to him. He stalks out of the post office, leaving the reader staring after him and, though one's sympathies are with Ibrahim, you wonder how many times this has happened to the reader.

Ibrahim goes off to get his *Carte d'identité.* There are three clerks at the government office, three of Dakar's 10,000 unneeded civil servants. One is reading a magazine and discussing (in French) getting a loan from one of his fellow workers. The loan is finally agreed to, but with exorbitant interest. The clerk goes back to his magazine. Ibrahim stands at the window, uncertain what to do. The clerk reads. Ibrahim stands. The clerk reads some more. Ibrahim continues to stand until one of the other clerks calls attention to him. The window clerk looks up from his magazine and addresses Ibrahim in his own language with the rudeness which seems to be the one qualification for a job in a government bureaucracy. Ibrahim requests an identity card and is asked for the place and date of his birth. Ibrahim, of course, knows only that he was born "around 1900." "You must know the exact date and place of birth. Without it we cannot give you an identity card." But surely the young clerk has not been so French-fried that he does not realize that he is asking for information which Ibrahim could not possibly have. But there is nothing which links the clerk and Ibrahim except the color of their skin and that, it is becoming obvious, is not enough.

I had had my dreams of Africa. And although I am accustomed to being insulted and mistreated by blacks in positions of authority in this country, I still didn't want to believe that it would be the same in Africa. But Ibrahim goes from experience to experience as if he is wandering through some Danteesque hell. A nephew, a civil servant, arranges with a friend to get an identity card for Ibrahim and then, needing two photographs, Ibrahim goes to have his picture taken. He walks by a row of small photo shops, pretending to be merely looking at the photographs on display on placards outside, until a black man comes out and leads him inside one of the studios. Ibrahim gets his picture taken for 500 francs—which he borrowed – and you have that sinking feeling that there probably wasn't even film in the camera. Ibrahim returns on three consecutive days to get his photos and he is finally told that the photos did not come out and to go away and forget about it. Ibrahim strikes the photographer, smashes his camera, and gets his nose bloodied in return.

It is at this point, perhaps, that you know that even if Ibrahim does get the money order cashed, it will make little difference. It will be scant compensation for all that has happened. Prior to the *mandabi,* Ibrahim was poor, but so were all of his neighbors. He was poor, but he had his self-respect and his dignity and among his peers, he was an unquestionable equal. Now, his friends wait outside the door to his yard waiting for him to come home with the money. They visit him with many smiles and beg for money, which Ibrahim, being a good fellow,

promises. They come and beg for food, knowing that Ibrahim has been advanced many bushels of rice from the grocer, who also awaits the redemption of the *mandabi*. Ibrahim ceases to be simply Ibrahim, which was his only significance. Now he has greater significance. He is the *mandabi*. And it is only to his wives that he remains a human being. It is they who try and protect him from his friends and protect the *mandabi,* too, for they must feed the children with the money from it. One of them gives Ibrahim her necklace to pawn when he does not have the money to make one of the interminable trips downtown and it is perhaps one of the few moments in the film when Ibrahim seems to realize that his wives are more than personal body-servants.

Ibrahim is eventually cheated out of the money by a young black lawyer who promises to get it if Ibrahim signs a statement giving him permission to do so. We have seen the young lawyer earlier in the film promising another young black, who wants to buy Ibrahim's house, that he will get it for him. So when Ibrahim makes his mark on a piece of paper, we are uncertain if he is unknowingly signing away his house or merely giving permission to have the money order cashed. When Ibrahim returns to the home of the lawyer the next day to get his money, at long last, the lawyer tells him that he was robbed of the money, etc., etc., etc. It is Ibrahim who has been robbed and he knows it, but there is nothing he can do, but weep and wail and plead, unwilling to believe that all of this has happened to him and unable to understand why.

Ibrahim is the central character of the film and if a film is supposed to have a hero, he is that, also. But he is a hero who does not act; he is acted upon. And the chief actor is only seen in the film in person once. As Ibrahim waits outside a government building, a white man, his wife, and child, come out, pause at the top of the steps as the man reads a document, and then proceed down the steps and out of sight. The camera does not focus on them, but catches them out of the corner of the eye, as it were. Just a glimpse, but it is enough to be a violent shock. By the time they appear, you have adjusted yourself to the delightful (if you're black), strange (if you're white) experience of seeing nothing but blacks on the screen. Then, out of nowhere, white people! My God! But they do not look like the stereotyped colonialist, white suit and white hat. The man is young, casually dressed, and has a beard. He looks like a decent human being, but what is he doing in Africa? He can't be up to much good! And having been immersed in the sensuality of black skins, how pale and ugly these white people look, you almost utter aloud in disgust. But by that time, they are gone, as the camera goes inside the building.

The film focuses on Ibrahim, but white people are its subject. And we see them throughout the film. Ibrahim confronts them in the apartment of his nephew, the one who tries to arrange for him to get an identity card. Ibrahim looks and feels out of place in the small, sterile apartment, with its modern furniture and its modern inhabitants – a young man, suit and tie, and his son who is wearing short pants and sitting primly on the couch (which looks like it came off Third Avenue in Harlem, a dollar down and a dollar a week). The apartment has nothing to do with Senegal.

Ibrahim confronts them whenever he meets a young black, who talks to his friends in French and to Ibrahim in the native tongue. The use of two languages in the film (Wolof and French) is skillfully done, slipping in and out, making of Ibrahim now a participant, now an alien.

Western civilization appears when Ibrahim's wives are working in the yard and a man (black) comes along, selling brassieres. The wife looks them over carefully and, expecting the money order to be cashed, she takes a red one from its hook. No, no, beautiful woman! But thereafter, there is the small part of a red bra strap staining her black skin, as it goes over her shoulder and beneath her flowing robes to choke her breasts.

Most of the blacks in the film represent Western civilization to some degree. Only Ibrahim and his wives are the exceptions. And it is impossible to really hate them for they, too, are victims. They, too, are caught in the vise of a history they did not make. The grocer, who must decide every time someone walks in the store whether he can afford to let them have more food without having been paid for the food of the previous months. The young civil servants, educated into French culture and who now speak French among themselves because it is the language of "civilized" people. Pity the young reader at the post office, who can probably recite Racine, Corneille, and La Rochefoucauld from memory, who knows the rulers of France from the reign of Charlemagne, who has been made to see the height of civilization in the statuary of Notre Dame instead of the minarets of the mosque. (For me, the most exciting scene of the film was the saying of prayers outside the mosque and the singing of the *muezzin*. It was Africa before the white man, eternal Africa, black Africa, Africa as Africa, and not Africa in its struggle for life against the West. In that scene I was part of the Africa of my forebears and felt an inexplicable communion with the faithful who knelt on the mats and bowed to the East.) Pity the reader for he has entered that world of double-consciousness, he has gained nothing except a knowledge of French and lost everything – himself.

The four women of the film are the most dynamic and vital people we meet. Ibrahim's two wives are gentle strength personified. They are young, much younger than Ibrahim, and between them there is an obvious love and affection. They are like sisters to each other. As wives they are obedient, attentive, and respective. Ibrahim berates them for the slightest thing, but they never show resentment. They are aware of his faults and seek to protect him from them. When a neighbor comes to borrow rice, Ibrahim tells one of the wives to give away most of what they have. She protests and Ibrahim commands her to do as he says. The wife gives away only a fraction of the rice, claiming that it is all they have, knowing that the next day when Ibrahim sits down to fill his great belly, he will be grateful. And even if he is not, the wives are determined that the children will not starve. One of the most intense scenes of the film occurs when Ibrahim goes to the grocer to borrow money. The grocer refuses him, knowing that he has given Ibrahim many bushels of rice, that he gave him cash for his wife's necklace, which Ibrahim did not redeem, and he is wondering if there ever was a *mandabi*. Ibrahim pleads and the grocer becomes indignant and insulting. Ibrahim returns the anger and insults and a small fight breaks out. The grocer threatens to call the police, who will make Ibrahim pay what he owes, if not in cash, then in property. The law can make him pay what he owes. The two wives push their way into the store through the crowd which has gathered and without hesitation they begin to insult, yell, and scream at the grocer. He backs away into a corner, pleading for Ibrahim "to get these women away from

me." But they are there to protect Ibrahim and if he had not told them to go outside it is clear that they would have left only after they had wrecked the grocer's store. They are worth a film in themselves.

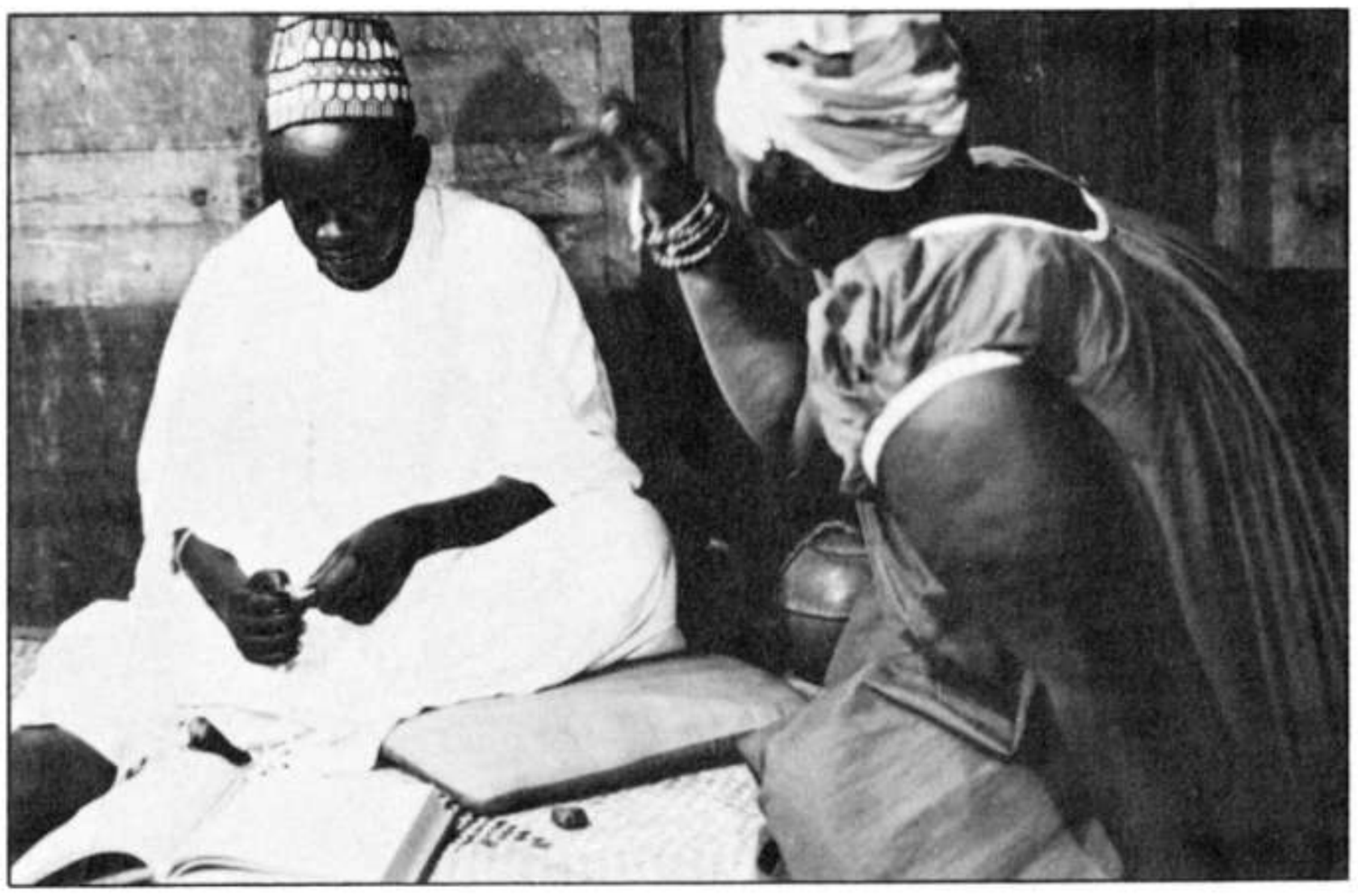
For those of us who have heard of polygamous relationships, this film affords the opportunity to observe one. However, is it something which a Westerner can understand? The polygamous relationship has a long history in Africa, pre-dating Mohammedanism, which perhaps adapted itself to what was already custom. While I loved the wives, I felt uncomfortable with their total loyalty and submissiveness. Their lives were lived through Ibrahim, it seemed. Were they thereby oppressed? Within my context, yes. But what about within theirs? Their context is one that I do not know and, to a great degree, cannot know. So I accepted them as they presented themselves, but hurting each time Ibrahim failed to give them the respect, love, and gratitude they deserved.

Ibrahim's sister is another strong figure. She is the mother of the nephew who has sent the money order and comes for her share. While Ibrahim can intimidate his wives, he withers before his sister. She shows nothing but complete contempt for him, though she has an affection for his wives, who intercede between her and their husband when the tension reaches the breaking point.

The other black woman in the film is seen sitting on a couch filing her nails, in the apartment of the lawyer. She wears a dress, speaks French, and if she is not a whore, she might as well be from her manner and looks. She is only in the film for a minute at most, but it is enough to establish another point of contact with the film's subject matter — the white man.

There is another woman in the film — a naked white doll which belongs to Ibrahim's children. It is seen lying in the yard and on the porch. It is never shown just for itself (there are no phony close-ups in the film to make sure you don't miss a symbol). Each time you see the doll, it is an integral part of the scene. Indeed, the camera does not pay any attention to the doll. It is as if it were there and the camera caught it along with everything else, but wasn't aware of it. You are, though. Each time you glimpse it, it is like being slapped across the mouth. It is the most infuriating thing in the film.

No one in the film is an abstraction. These are people in a particular historical, social, and cultural situation. They are not wholly admirable. Nor wholly despicable. You can feel some degree of sympathy and empathy toward everyone.



We feel the world through Ibrahim. He is the white man's victim. Indeed, he is Africa in transition. An illiterate peasant without a *Carte d'identité*. Yet, you don't pity him, because he does not pity himself. Instead, you feel his bewilderment, his frustration, and his sorrow. (After the fight with the photographer, he sits beneath a tree, his white robe spotted with his blood, the blood still dripping from his nose. You want to cry with him, not for him.) Even in the horrible scene near the end, when he gets on his knees and pleads over and over for the money he knows he will never get from the lawyer, you don't pity him. A poor man's most important possession is his self-respect and Ibrahim retains his.

He returns home from the lawyer's house and tells his wives that he has been cheated out of the money. He does not yet know that he will lose his home, too, but if he did not sign it away to the lawyer unknowingly, he will lose the house to the grocer to pay his debts. He has been defeated. Then, in the last scene, the postman, who has appeared twice before with the news about the *mandabi,* enters the yard, and learning the fate which has befallen Ibrahim, tells him that it does not have to be that way, that people do not have to be poor, that there is a way to fight. Ibrahim and his wives look at the postman in bewilderment, having little idea what he is talking about. And the film ends.

You are confused, Western viewer, veteran of Fellini, Godard, Truffaut, and Antonioni. The ending seems out of place, as if it were put on as an afterthought. It sounds almost as if it came out of Central Casting in Moscow. It comes so suddenly and we are not prepared for it. And perhaps that is the point. We were prepared for everything else, because Ibrahim's degrading experiences have been our own. But unlike Ibrahim, we have picked up revolutionary theories almost by osmosis. Whether we agree with them or not, we can engage in a political discussion just for the intellectual stimulation we get.

The postman is not a Greenwich Village or Harlem intellectual. He is a postman, a middle-aged man, who is probably not aware that Che and Mao ever existed. More than likely, he is a peasant like Ibrahim, but unlike Ibrahim, he went to school (probably a Roman Catholic mission school), became literate, and joined the postal service. As a postman he has a unique position in the life of the city, for his work brings him into contact with young intellectuals and the peasants, like Ibrahim. Unlike the intellectuals, however, he is able to be exposed to the new without losing his relation to the old. He hears things and sees things and somewhere in his daily moving in and out of both worlds (and one has the feeling that he lives, not in a Western-style apartment, but in Ibrahim's neighborhood), he begins to think about what he sees. And he begins to talk to different people. Eventually he concludes that there is a way out of the vise, that there is a way for Senegal to be its own master instead of France's victim. In the little that he says at the

end of the film, it is unclear if he belongs to an organization, a secret organization that is making long-range plans. Perhaps, for he speaks with the confidence and assurance which can only come from being a part of a group. He has his eyes open constantly for those who might be receptive to the new knowledge he has to bring. Thus, he speaks to Ibrahim.

Within the context of the film, it is not important that we know how Ibrahim responds. And Ibrahim's response is really not important. What is important is that another layer of consciousness within Senegal is revealed. Thus, in the figures of Ibrahim and the postman, we see a total Africa — the old which has been made a victim, and the victim beginning to fight back. That is enough.

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.

I confronted myself in the film. I don't think it's impossible for whites to confront themselves in it, also. In fact, I know it isn't. The film is, after all, about them. The question is, as it has always been, will they allow themselves to be confronted? I doubt it. □