

Charles Tonderai Mudede

# Neoliberalism and the New Afro- Pessimism: Djibril Diop Mambéty's Hyènes

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We are done. I'm not speaking only about us here in Africa but of humanity, of man. We have sold our soul too cheaply. The feeling I have is that we are done for if we have traded our souls for money.

– Djibril Diop Mambéty

Senegal's second greatest director, Djibril Diop Mambéty, only made two features. The country's greatest director, Ousmane Sembène, made eight. Mambéty was born in 1945, Sembène in 1923. Mambéty lived for only fifty-three years, Sembène for eighty-four. It is useful to think of the two artists in terms of a golden age and a silver age. Sembène represents the former and Mambéty the latter, in much the same way that Yasujirō Ozu is the former and Nagisa Oshima the latter in Japanese cinema. With the golden age, we have the artist as a resounding bell; with the silver age, the artist as Baudelaire's *cloche fêlée*, the cracked bell.

But what is this cracked bell? It is a condemnation with pessimism. Sembène's work is consistent with that of all golden ages because it condemned without pessimism. Mambéty's work, like that of other silver ages (*cloche fêlée*), condemned but without hope for redemption. His criticisms were omnidirectional and unsparing. This is why it was possible to accuse Mambéty of giving in to afro-pessimism – but not in its original sense of relating the failure of African economic development to something cultural, something even genetic, something deep in the African character. This bad brand of afro-pessimism ignores the high interest rates on African debts, or the political support of corrupt African leaders who are aligned with European or American business interests, or the IMF's enforcement of economic development programs that have never worked anywhere in the world and at anytime in the three-hundred-year history of capitalism. Bad afro-pessimism claims that Africa is stuck because it is Africa.

Mambéty's second and last feature film, *Hyènes* (Hyenas), is, without a doubt, deeply pessimistic, and it is set in Africa; but it views African failure as something far more profound and universal. His pessimism is found not in the depth of the African character but in the human one. In fact, if one were not told of the true origin of *Hyènes*, one would naturally assume it is 100 percent African, that it's rooted in black culture, that it is a part of Senegal's rich oral tradition. It looks like a perfectly black African parable of the dangers of greed and the foibles of communal life. One could even imagine transforming its main characters into animals, a common feature



Seen here in stills, Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl* (1966) is considered part of the Golden Age of African Cinema.

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Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* [The Journey of the Hyena] (1973) features a university student and a cowherd who steal money in order to leave Dakar for Paris.

for African folk tales: the wise lion, the crafty rabbit, the persistent turtle, the pensive elephant. Indeed, the film begins with a herd of elephants, who, at the stroke of one cut, become human beings. But this is all an illusion. This is why the first and biggest surprise one encounters when examining the movie's background and steps of development is that the source of its story isn't anywhere in Africa but in the heart of Europe. The story of the prostitute who returns to her village to exact revenge on the man who broke her heart when she was young and vulnerable was all dreamt up in the head of a Swiss. *Hyènes* turns out to be a very faithful adaptation of *The Visit*, a play by the German-Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt. And it is this link between a work that is so European and one that appears so African that captures the essence of Mambéty's genius as an artist and the humanity of his pessimism.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* was even made into a film with Hollywood stars in 1964. Ingrid Bergman played the prostitute and Anthony Quinn the heartbreaker. But this adaptation is unfaithful and emptied of the pessimism that permeates and punctuates the original. *Hyènes* was made twenty-eight years later, at a time when the post-independence, post-Fanon optimism had evaporated from most of Africa. The dreams of the struggle for black liberation resulted in nothing but dry and bitter broken promises. We had exited the postcolonial era of the heroic Sembène and entered a new and sober era of globalized capital with pockets completely emptied by corrupt black leaders and debts to Western banks. Mambéty announced this new era splendidly with his broken bell. He did not only preserve the pessimism in Dürrenmatt's play but concentrated it with an appropriated but reevaluated European postcolonial afro-pessimist discourse.

The story goes like this: After many, many years, the prostitute with a broken heart returns to the poor village, Colobane, as a very rich woman. Her name is Linguere Ramatou. She is now old. She has a golden hand and golden leg. She never smiles. She has more money than the World Bank (this point is made twice in the movie). Those who can recall the tune "Never Been to Me" by Charlene (first released in 1977 and rereleased in 1982) should know the lines:

I've been to Nice and the isle of Greece  
Where I sipped champagne on a yacht  
I moved like Harlow in Monte Carlo and  
showed 'em what I've got  
I've been undressed by kings and I've seen  
some things  
That a woman ain't s'posed to see.

If you can picture that glamorous, seedy world, then you have a pretty good idea of the kind of life Linguere Ramatou led during her long exile, and the source of her wealth.

The man who broke her heart is Dramaan Drameh. Through a favorable marriage he now owns the town's only grocery store, but he is not generous with credit because everyone in town is broke. The soldiers are broke, the teacher is broke, and even the mayor is broke. Early in the movie, the furniture in the town hall is repossessed. The poverty in Colobane is unrelenting – people even walk slowly, dragging their feet from place to place, as if the lack of money weighs down on them. Linguere Ramatou's return is met with great excitement and hope. Is she a good person? Will she be generous? Will she save the town? She will! But on one condition: the town must kill the man who broke her heart, and who forced her to leave her community.

The mayor, with the town's approval, rejects the offer, saying: "We are in Africa but the drought will never make us savages." The village agrees with the mayor. They have rules, customs, beliefs, morals. They will not kill an innocent man for money. That is immoral. That is what animals do in Darwin's race for survival. They are not animals. They are humans. Linguere Ramatou sets up a tent outside of the town and waits. Her offer still stands. How long can this community resist her money? Not long at all. Indeed, not even a day, because almost immediately members of the community begin buying things on credit.

The borrowing begins with the grocery store owned by Dramaan Drameh, who, though reluctant to provide credit, is obliged to because he now owes the town his life. As the days pass, the borrowing escalates and spreads. The locals buy new shoes, expensive cigarettes and booze, household appliances, and so on. A carnival even comes to town. Fireworks explode in the sky. The people of Colobane shoot up and down on a roller coaster with their hands in the air.<sup>1</sup> They are having the time of their lives. The grocer sees the writing on the wall: he is now a walking dead man. These debts need to be paid, and his life is the only thing that can settle them.

But here the film takes an interesting turn and adds something new to the original story. The justice system that eventually sentences Drameh to death is not colonial but older, African, even pre-Islamic. The ethos at the core of the death sentence is communal; it is the ethos of social formations that behavioral ecologists and anthropologists associate with hunter-gatherers. And the ethos of such groups is strictly and sometimes militantly egalitarian. At the end of the film, Dramaan Drameh is judged

and executed by a process that in ancient times was meant to maintain equality among the members of the community. The stark conclusion of *Hyènes* is that the enforcement mechanism (communal killing) of the egalitarian ethos has effectively been captured by neoliberalism.

But we can't stop here. We need to go deeper than this reading of capture, which can also be applied to the original play. Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* was completed in 1956, and the English drama critic Kenneth Tynan wrote in 1960 about the play:

The plot by now must be well known; a flamboyant, much-married millionairess returns to the Middle-European town where she was born and offers the inhabitants a free gift of a billion marks if they will consent to murder the man who, many years ago, seduced and jilted her ... Eventually, and chillingly, her chosen victim is slaughtered, but I quarrel with those who see the play merely as a satire on greed. It is really a satire on bourgeois democracy. The citizens ... vote to decide whether the hero shall live or die, and he agrees to abide by their decision. Swayed by the dangled promise of prosperity, they pronounce him

guilty. The verdict is at once monstrously unjust and entirely democratic. When the curtain falls, the question that Herr Dürrenmatt intends to leave in our minds is this: at what point does economic necessity turn democracy into a hoax?<sup>2</sup>

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In the way democracy was captured by Keynesian-era capitalism in *The Visit*, the egalitarian ethos of communal life is captured by neoliberalism in *Hyènes*. But the capture of the former is far more devastating than the capture of the latter. Democracy is still a relatively new institution, so one can understand its vulnerability and even forgive it. The mechanism that supports the egalitarian ethos (communal killing), on the other hand, can be argued to be *the* mechanism by which human morality was spawned and shaped. It is much, much older than democracy, and much more about the animal origins of our humanity.

With the support of evidence gathered from anthropological studies, it has been argued that what distinguishes the human animal from other animals is the social selection process of egalitarian justice. Morality is our species-being. The beaver has its dam; we have morality. In the way a beaver uses its teeth to cut and gather the



Though previously adapted by Bernhard Wicki as *The Visit* (1964) featuring Ingrid Bergman, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play conveys the broken promises of post-independence Africa in Mambéty's adaptation.

wood it needs for its niche, and in the way that this niche in turn shapes and defines its maker, we have also cut and carved the social space forming the morality that has shaped and defined us.

In his book *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame*, the social anthropologist Christopher Boehm writes:

Both punitive and positive social selection were closely involved with group political dynamics, and when band members started to form consensual moral opinions, and were systematically punishing deviant behaviors, a novel and powerful element was added to human evolutionary process. The ultimate result was the human nature we carry around with us today ... Lethal attacks on disliked individuals by sizable coalitions can be projected back into the Late Pleistocene Epoch with great confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the book:

These mechanisms entailed social selection in the sense that preferences shared by groups were affecting gene

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pools. More specifically, all involved *negative* preferences, and all disadvantaged the reproductive prospects of individuals prone to social deviance – or at least those who could not control their ... inappropriate hunger for power. For such moralistic social selection to have been a significant factor in shaping human gene pools, probably it had to be operating for at least a thousand generations.<sup>4</sup>

This social selection led to what Charles Darwin in the *Descent of Man* described as “group selection,” but not in the sense of groups competing against groups directly, but in Prince Pyotr Kropotkin’s sense of a group facing the challenges of its environment.<sup>5</sup> Groups that were dominated by tyrannical individuals simply went extinct: strong men do not make a strong community (that view of things is actually new to our kind of animal). Those groups that maintained equality among members survived: a group of weak individuals is more likely to be stronger as a whole. Counter to the ruling ideologies of our times, dependency actually increases the strength of a society because it increases cooperative behavior. And this is exactly how we made ourselves in the social



In Mambéty's film *Hyenas* (1992), tribal justice becomes a tool of neoliberalism.

space, or constructed the niche of our morality.

The grocer of Colobane dies in the poisoned pool of human morality. His death is also the death of what made us human in the first place – our morality, which was itself developed to keep tyrannical behavior in check for the survival of the community or band. (It has to be pointed out that humans are not the only animal with a strong sense of morality, or of equivalence; the very social capuchin monkey has this sense as well.) “We are not savages.”

After the grocer’s death, the prostitute makes big investments in the region. The movie that began with elephants ends with massive construction vehicles clearing earth for new luxury condos. We also see a new airport. Colobane is being globalized. But the price for this progress is not just our soul – *Hyènes* places the religious institution second to human morality: even the priest in the movie is almost immediately corrupted by the woman with more money than the World Bank. The price is our very humanness.

In the postcolonial cinema of Sembène, the soul can be defended because the Keynesian economics of his moment and its capture of democracy still left some room for national development. Capital controls were permitted, which meant capitalism had a limit, an inside and an outside. The outside of capital is where the soul or the spirit of the nation could reside. This national outside is where *Hyènes* begins.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview, Mambéty said:

My goal was to make a continental film, one that crosses boundaries. To make *Hyènes* 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.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the movie, however, the nation is no more and the status of our species-being has been profoundly disturbed. What kind of animal are we now? This is the afro-pessimism Mambéty introduced in 1992. It’s not so much a question of why Africa has failed to develop, but of what capitalist development means to begin with. What kind of system does it initiate? Clearly, it’s a kind of society that would never have survived the environments and challenges

of the Pleistocene – a society dominated by tyrannical individuals.

The community judges and kills an innocent man because it can no longer judge and kill the strong.<sup>8</sup> And is this not exactly the world we now live in? What once made us more equal (communal killing) now makes us more unequal (capital punishment). Look at who is on death row in the US: most are from the weakest classes.<sup>9</sup> The weak are being killed by an institution originating in a mechanism that equalized the weak with the strong. Morality is all about equalization, and the story that *Hyènes* tells is of how the equalization that benefitted the weak was deformed into a legal system that supports and maintains the power of the strong. It is therefore not surprising to find that the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1970s corresponds with the explosion of the US prison population. The Marxist geographer David Harvey marks 1973 as the year of neoliberalism’s birth. The year before that, the US prison population began its climb from 250,000 (when the US population was just over two hundred million) to 2.2 million today (when the US population is just over three hundred million).

It is also for this reason that Michel Foucault noticed that neoliberalism as a project is not about changing our society (that’s a Keynesian project), but who we are as a human, an animal.<sup>10</sup> The transformation has meant profoundly changing (and ultimately eliminating) human morality. Equality does not exist in a neoliberal world. There are only enterprises and debts to be paid.

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Charles Tonderai Mudede is a Zimbabwean-born cultural critic, filmmaker, and the Film Editor for *The Stranger*. Mudede collaborated with the director Robinson Devor on two films, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, both of which premiered at Sundance – *Zoo* was screened at Cannes. Mudede has contributed to the *New York Times*, *LA Weekly*, *Village Voice*, *Black Souls Journal*, *C Theory*, *Cinema Scope*, and is on the editorial board for the *Arcade Journal* and *Black Scholar*. Mudede has lived in Seattle since 1989.

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1  
What makes this scene very interesting is not just that it was shot in Paris, but also that it was shot during the annual Carnival of Humanity organized by the French Communist Party. This carnival for the proletariat doubles as a carnival for indebted neoliberal consumers. Such was the depth of Mambéty's pessimism.

2  
As quoted here  
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/money-changes-every-thing/Content?oid=887898>

3  
Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 83.

4  
Ibid, 87. Emphasis in the original.

5  
See Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1902)  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1902/mutual-aid>

6  
In *Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, Kojin Karatani, the Japanese Hegelian, organizes society into three forms: capitalism, the state, and the nation. Each of these forms has a deep history. Capitalism comes from European mercantilism; the state from the European absolutist monarchy; and the nation from European peasantry. The essential figure in each is: money, the king, and the village. The modern European state came into formation in the 16th century by first the alliance of merchants (the city) and the king (the castle). These two were soon joined with the tribe (the village) to become what we still have today: capitalist nation-state.

To modernize, each formation challenged and defeated its past. Democracy challenged the absolutist monarchy (beheading the king); classical political economy (Adam Smith, David Ricardo) challenged the core obsession of mercantilism, which was money, bullionism; and cosmopolitanism (tolerance) challenged "rural idiocy." But when there is a crisis, the modernized forms (capitalism, the state, nationalism) revert to their original, pre-modern condition. And each formation has its essential crisis: for the state, it is war; for the market, it is an economic crash or bust; for the nation, it is the appearance of the stranger. When war happens, we get a king. When a crash occurs, we get a run on the bank, a panic to go liquid, a primal mercantilist obsession with money (bullionism). When a stranger appears, we get the tribe.

Also, these forms have only been in harmony in the decades between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s. Wolfgang Streeck, the German sociologist, calls this the era of democratic capitalism. The Bretton Woods economic order that was established in 1944 imposed capital controls, and thereby limited power of capital and provided space for national and democratic integration and development. Before the Second World War, the tensions between democracy and nation on one side and capitalism on the other, had been escalating. The destruction caused by the war and the subsequent reconstruction of Europe eased these tensions not only in the West but much of the developing world.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the reconstruction and rediscovery of nationalist identities and spirit in African states that were protected from the world culture of the world market. This freedom came to an end in the 1980s with the repurposing of the World Bank and IMF (Bretton Woods institutions), the formation of the Washington Consensus, and the deployment of Economic Adjustment Programs that required the liberalization of capital markets in poor and developing nations. This ended the national project as it was known in the post-war Keynesian period. This is the meaning of the references to the World Bank in *Hyènes*, a film made in the opening years of capitalism's resurgence. The nation and democracy were disconnected. The peace between capital and nation/democracy proved to be brief.

7  
N. Frank Ukadike, "The Hyena's Last Laugh: A Conversation with Djibril Diop Mambéty," *Transition* 78 (1999): 136–53  
<http://newsreel.org/articles/mambety.htm>

8  
Djibril Diop Mambéty: "Dramaan Drameh in *Hyènes*, 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." Ibid.

9  
"Capital punishment in the United States is administered in an economically discriminatory way. The wealth disparity between those murderers who live and those who die constitutes a serious constitutional challenge to the permissibility of the death penalty." Jeffrey L. Johnson and Colleen F. Johnson, "Poverty and the Death Penalty," *Journal of Economic Issues*, vol. 35, no. 2 (June 2001): 517–23.

10  
Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*,



trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010).

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