



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Mandabi

Money – its prospect or absence – is the root of all misfortune in Sembene's debut feature, a darkly satirical fable in which a man, complacently lording it over his two wives, is sent a money order by a nephew in Paris, only to fall foul of bureaucracy, parasitical neighbours, corruption and his own pride. A caustic portrait of shifting power-bases in a post-colonial Senegal.

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Hearing of the difficulties faced by the BFI and the Cineteca di Bologna as they attempted to digitise the work of the great filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, Martin Scorsese was prompted to action. 'It was like the movie was a prisoner,' says Alain Sembène, the director's son, recalling how the 35mm negatives of *Black Girl* (*La Noire de...*, 1966), his father's seminal 55-minute debut, were being stored by the film laboratory Eclair in France. 'It was stuck in bureaucracy because there were documents my father had not signed. We almost gave up. Then Martin Scorsese wrote a letter saying it was a scandal, and boom, it happened.'

I was speaking to Alain Sembène following the premiere of the restoration of his father's second film *Mandabi* at the Lumière Festival in Lyon in 2019. *Mandabi* – the first feature made in the Wolof language – has been remastered in 4K with StudioCanal's partners at the French post-production company VDM, scanned from the original 35mm interpositive. The sound too has been remastered from badly damaged archive footage. At last, the film can be fully appreciated as a crucial work by a master director.

That it took Scorsese's efforts to kickstart the remastering of the director's work is an indication of the widespread failure to appreciate Sembène. This may seem an odd statement, given how often he is described as 'the father of African cinema'. Yet underlying this praise is a suggestion that Sembène's legitimacy rests on where he made films: it's time that discussion of Sembène's work focused on what it is about.

His magnificent 1968 film *Mandabi* is about the problems that the ageing, unemployed Ibrahima (Makhouredia Gueye) faces when he receives a money order from his nephew in Paris. *Black Girl* – about the struggles of a young Senegalese woman working as a servant in Paris – was Sembène's first feature, but *Mandabi* is the film that marks out the themes of his career: his anti-capitalist, anti-religious concerns, and his clear-sighted probing of issues of class.

The film may attack colonialism but, importantly, it also attacks those citizens who, once the European powers left the continent, did everything in their power to maintain the status quo. In Senegal, this meant retaining French as the official language, even though most Senegalese only spoke Wolof or Arabic, and taking on elements of bureaucracy to ensure that it was nigh on impossible to climb the social ladder.

For all its weighty implications, the beauty of *Mandabi* is that it looks and feels so simple. The plot follows Ibrahima, an unemployed father of seven, as he tries to cash the money order. He has two wives who dote on him and turn a blind eye to his failings; although life is difficult, he is content. That changes

when his nephew sends him a money order for 25,000 CFA francs (about \$50). The parable then slowly reveals itself – the arrival of capital from France will ruin his life.

To start with, Ibrahima cannot understand the letter, written as it is in French. Then the post office refuses to accept the money order because he doesn't have an identity card – which he cannot get because he doesn't have a birth certificate. Meanwhile, word gets out about the windfall, and friends, neighbours and religious figures come to him asking for donations and loans, while more educated men set out to swindle Ibrahima. Sembène reinforces his critique of capitalism by appearing in the film himself, sitting at a table beneath a Che Guevara poster.

Born to a family of fishermen in the southern Senegalese region of Casamance in 1923, Sembène moved to France after World War II, where he worked as a docker, becoming active in the unions and embracing Marxist philosophy, before a back injury forced him to rest. He used his time to write poetry and prose; his third novel, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), about the difficulties of being an immigrant in France, was a huge hit. Sembène adapted *Mandabi* from his novella *Le Mandat*, which was first published in France in 1966, around the time that *Black Girl* screened at the Cannes Film Festival.

At the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar in April 1966, Sembène won a literature prize for *Le Mandat* and a film prize for *Black Girl*. André Malraux, author and French minister of culture, was a guest of honour, and offered to arrange for France's Centre national de la cinématographie to fund his next work. Ironically, given the film's themes, Sembène took the money and used it, in *Mandabi*, to reveal Europe's attempts to manage Africa for its own ends – to show that colonialism persists even when the guns have left, in the history told, and in the cultural and economic heritage that the colonial powers left behind.

One of the reasons that *Mandabi* was the first feature-length film in Wolof was that colonial administrations had banned natives from filmmaking – simply making the film was a political act. Sembène would argue that cinema enabled him to speak to the illiterate citizens that his novels were about.

All the big targets in *Mandabi* would remain central to Sembène's work throughout his career. The criticism of religion would feature right up to his ninth and final film, *Moolaadé* (2004), which addresses female genital mutilation. *Ceddo* (1977) was heavily censored in Senegal, according to rumour because of its religious content.

Sembène composed the score for *Mandabi* himself, with the music choices reflecting the traditions of African music, rather than the fusions popular in America and Cuba at the time. Every choice in the film is packed with such double meaning. *Mandabi* poses the question: why are Africans treated as second-class citizens, not just abroad but at home, in their own countries? Its clear-sighted urgency remains undimmed today.

Kaleem Aftab, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021

MANDABI (THE MONEY ORDER)

Director: Ousmane Sembène
Production Companies: Filmi Doomireew, Comptoir Français du Film Production
Participation: Ministère de la Coopération
Executive Producer: Robert de Nesle
Producer: Ousmane Sembène
Unit Production Manager: Ibrahima Barro
Production Managers: Jean Maumy, Paul S. Vieyra
Production Secretary: Awa Sylla
Assistant Director: Babakar Samb
Script Supervisor: Anne-Marie Rochas
Script: Ousmane Sembène
Director of Photography: Paul Soullignac
Camera Operators: Maya Bracher, J. Karistan
Assistant Camera Operator: Issa Tiaw
Gaffer: Emile Ganem
Assistant Gaffers: Dia Cherif, J. Diatta
Editors: Gilou Kikoïne, Max Saldinger
Laboratory: GTC
Music: Ousmane Sembène
Sound: Henry Molihe
Sound Assistant: El Hadji Mbow
Boom Operator: Mawa Gay

Cast

Makhouredia Gueye (Ibrahima Dieng)
Yunus Ndiay (Méty, 1st wife)
Isseu Niang (Aram, 2nd wife)
Mustafa Ture (M'barka, shopkeeper)
Farre Sar (businessman)
Serine Ndiay (Imam)
Mussa Diuf (Abdou, the nephew)
Serigne Sow (Maissa)
Christof Colomb (water merchant)
Madoun Faye (postman)
Mamadu Cisoko
Therese Bas (Dieng's sister)
Ousmane Sembène

Senegal/France 1968
93 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Mandabi (The Money Order)

Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10

Pandora's Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)

Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul 15:20 (with live piano accompaniment)

Blue Velvet

Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40

Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)

Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40

Matewan

Tue 19 Jul 18:00

His Girl Friday

Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45

Manhunter

Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Fri 22 Jul 18:30 and Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)

The Piano

Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45

The Scarlet Empress

Sun 24 Jul 13:20

Theorem (Teorema)

Tue 26 Jul 18:00

IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

VISIONARY FILMS OF AFROFUTURISM, MYTH AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

The Burial of Kojo

Fri 15 Jul 18:30; Thu 28 Jul 20:40

In the Afrofuture

Sun 17 Jul 16:00

The Black Atlantic

Mon 18 Jul 18:15 (+ Q&A); Sat 30 Jul 12:00

Eve's Bayou

Tue 19 Jul 20:45; Thu 28 Jul 18:00

Sankofa

Wed 20 Jul 20:35

Kuso

Fri 22 Jul 18:10

Touki Bouki

Wed 27 Jul 20:50

Top of the Heap

Sat 30 Jul 20:45

Atlantics (Atlantique)

Sun 31 Jul 15:40

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