

Creating the Anti-Western: Counter Discourse and Counter “Development” in African Cinema

By

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I was giving a talk on Senegalese filmmaker Sembène Ousmane’s transition from writing to filmmaking last Spring, when, during question and answer, a colleague asked me, in a tone that suggested the question was asking more than it seemed to be asking, whether I knew with certainty that Sembene made his own films. A bit taken aback by the question, I asked the colleague to explain precisely what he meant by the question, and he did so, asking me whether I had evidence that Sembene was the author of his films, whether he personally wrote them, filmed them, edited them and did all of the post-production work himself.

In answer to this query, I asked the colleague whether he had ever asked that question about Steven Spielberg or George Lucas, although it is almost certain they do not fulfill all of those functions when they make a film. My point of course was that, somehow, for African directors, the standards of authorship were being applied very differently than they were to non-African directors. And I begin with this anecdote, because it highlights at least one of the many ways in which the issue of authorship and the stakes of authorship in African Cinema are very different than they are in perhaps any other cinema.

When cinema emerged in 1895, it was at the height of the colonial period. The fact that the technology on which cinema was built had developed in the West, during the colonial era meant that Africans would be denied film authorship for more than half a

century. Moreover, it meant that cinema, as many critics and scholars have noted, would be used as a tool used to legitimize and aid in the colonial project over the course of the same half century and beyond. Many critics and scholars have recognized the propagandistic nature of overtly colonial films, which narrate directly the conquest of Africa by Europeans, depicting Africa as a wild “uncivilized” space, lacking in technology, and which contrasts, in the logic of such films, with the space of Europe, and the West in general and which is presented as one of discipline, “civilization” and technology. Films of this kind include Jacques Feyder’s (silent film version of *L’Atlantide* (1920) and Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s sound version of *L’Atlantide* (1932), Edmond T. Greville’s *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935), and Jacques de Baroncelli’s *L’Homme du Niger* (1940). However, such films never constituted a uniform genre, and were actually rather marginal with respect to overall film production.

I would argue that there was another genre that also effectively served as a vehicle for colonial or neo-colonial discourse, even if its setting was not Africa and even if it was, for the most part, produced in Hollywood. That genre was the Western. For the Western, one of the earliest film genres to evolve, had at its core, as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson note, “the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier” (118), a “lawless frontier that can quite easily substitute for a “lawless” jungle or savannah. Moreover, as Bordwell and Thompson also assert, in the Western, civilization is linked to certain people who perform certain functions, schoolteachers, bankers and government officials, officials who share the same function in the colonial imaginary. Moreover, nature and natural spaces are, in the Western, linked to uncivilized natives, lawlessness and primitiveness, in much the same way as they are in colonial discourse.

The Western also advances the idea that it is normal, fitting, and inevitable that white Westerners overwrite the spaces of nature, and displace, subdue or eradicate the indigenous population with their banks, schools and government, which is quite similar to what took place in colonial practice.

Finally, I would point out that many consider that there have been two waves of colonialism in Africa, the first wave of colonial occupation by the European powers, and a second, neo-colonial wave that occurred post-independence, and that involved an economic and cultural imperialism. The height of the Hollywood Western, of course, coincides with this second wave. And, since Westerns have been widely screened in Africa, they have served what André Gardies has defined as the specific function of colonial cinema, that of the dispossession and dis-identification of the African, since a spectator viewing most Western films is forced into an identification with the white cowboy and the culture and economy he represents.

This mini-history should make it clear that film authorship in Africa, is bound up with larger notions of independence and agency. Moreover, it should be apparent why Africans were denied the right to make films by colonial authorities for most of the colonial period—the first African film, *Afrique sur seine*, appearing in 1955, but made in France, and the first African film to be made in Africa, Sembene Ousmane's *La Noire de...*, appearing in 1963. From the time of these very first films, questions of authorship and independence have taken center stage (or screen). There are concerns about funding, distribution, equipment, facilities, and film crews, all of which elevate “making film in Africa ... to the realm of a miracle” as Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé has often remarked. But there are also, perhaps more importantly, concerns about the nature and

function of film itself. The fact that film language and film narrative evolved in the way that they did, and the fact that they were used overtly to advance colonial ideology means, as many African filmmakers have argued, that film's standard narrative conventions and visual poetic are deeply rooted in a worldview that is not only non-African, it is in many ways, anti-African. As David Murphy has pointed out, there are some who would suggest that "all African films are inauthentic or 'Western' simply because cinema was first invented in the West" (241).

This kind of logic is certainly both reductive and problematic. For example, no one considers cinema inherently French because it was first invented in France. Nonetheless, African filmmakers are certainly aware that film *language*, that is, the language of narrative cinema is, in many regards, Western. It did not emerge naturally at the moment the technology was invented, but rather evolved over a fairly long period of time and was profoundly marked and influenced by the ideologies of the cultures in which it evolved. In that regard, film language may be seen in some respects as Western and colonial, and it should come as no surprise that African filmmakers have sought to challenge it.

Many African filmmakers have sought, for example, to rework narrative structure and film language overtly in order to make films in a way that is specifically and uniquely African. However, there is not universal agreement as to what that means. Olivier Barlet has identified this ambiguous search for an African cinema as a call for a return to traditional values that occurs simultaneously with a reexamination of those values (39). For some African directors, this has meant creating films that are rooted in Africa's own cultural forms, from the oral tradition to musical forms to the theater.

Filmmakers as diverse as Gaston Kaboré of Burkina Faso, Moussa Sena Absa of Senegal, Cheick Oumar Sissoko of Mali, and Brendan Shehu of Nigeria have discussed the influence of traditional African cultural forms on the filmmaking of African directors. The overwhelming majority of directors also choose to film in African languages, which is not necessarily an obvious choice given issues of distribution and audience, and the potentially limiting effect of subtitles. It is, however, a natural choice if the goal is to create films that reflect and speak to Africa. African directors have also often chosen to reinvent or innovate film language, breaking with the kinds of shots and editing techniques that are dominant in contemporary Hollywood and European films. I would argue that some directors, among them Kaboré, Sembène, and Cissé, have deliberately appropriated elements from very early silent film, including the use of tableau shots, the continuous take and the static camera. In this respect these filmmakers have, perhaps, returned film language to its very origins, in order to remake it. Some ill-informed or unthinking critics seem to have unconsciously recognized the gesture, without grasping its significance. For it is the use of such techniques that prompted some Western film critics to call African cinema “primitive.”

Whatever other choices African directors have made, however, many of them have sought to resolve what Olivier Barlet has called the “tradition / modernity opposition” through a motif that is present in the films themselves. This motif is that of the African who goes West, and it presents itself in films such as Sembene’s *La Noire de...* (1963) and *Mandabi* (1968), Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Touki Bouki* (1973) and *Hyenas* (1992), Amadou Seck’s *Saraaba* (1988), Moussa Sene Absa’s *Tableau Ferraille* (1998) and *Ainsi Meurent les anges* (2001), Ngangura Mweze’s *Pièces d’identité* (1998),

Mahamet Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), and Alain Gomis's *Lafrance* (2001), and to name but a few examples.

This motif may manifest either as the journey to the West by an African, the return from the West by an African, or the desire on the part of an African to travel West, without a westward journey being completed. It is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, these narratives of the African who goes West almost invariably end in one of three possibilities: either the African rejects the West, its values and its worldview as incompatible with his or her own values, worldview or identity, the African attempts to embrace the West in so doing experiences a complete loss of identity and subjectivity, which is sometimes inscribed as a death, or the African is left with the task of reconciling Africa and the West, but in the space of the film, this is never done. In this way, these films seem to be inscribing within their own narratives what Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno has described as African cinema's quest of imagining a modernity that "might not necessarily involve a mimicry of the West" (Barlet 88). In other words, a vision of modernity that breaks the linkage of the West and progress, the West and development, and searches for models that grounds the future in Africa's past.

What is also interesting about this motif, however, is that it challenges this West as development paradigm by challenging one of the narratives on which it was built and sustained, that is by undermining or at least deconstructing the move westward that forms the basis of the film Western. In place of the White man moving West to overwrite what he finds with "civilization," we have the African who moves West, either to reject that civilization or to be destroyed by it; either alternative collapses the structures upon which both colonial logic and the film Western are based. While time does not permit a detailed

exploration of how this motif functions in particular films, I would like to take a moment to examine, at least briefly, the way it functions in one of the most interesting films in which it appears, Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas*.

In Mambety's film, the motif is presented through the return of an African from the West, when Linguere Ramatou, a very rich African woman returns to her native Colobane. Ramatou, as the spectator learns over the course of the film, has made her money as a prostitute, after she was forced to leave the village in shame, made pregnant by her lover Dramaam Drameh. In exchange for promises of large sums of money, televisions, refrigerators and the financial restoration of Colobane, which has fallen into poverty, Ramatou asks for the death of Dramaam Drameh. Through the progressive corruption of the village and the structures and sense of community that bind them, Ramatou obtains what she wants, only to reveal that she is the reason for Colobane's poverty, having previously bought the village mines and ordered them closed.

Beyond the symbol of Linguere Ramatou as an agent of Western economic colonialism (Mambety has directly named the World Bank), Mambety takes on the issue of colonialism, neo-colonialism and the resulting loss of agency for Africa and Africans through the structure and genre of his film, for *Hyenas* is an anti-Western. Colobane is an African village, filled with dusty streets, like a movie Western town, its buildings have false fronts, like the main street buildings in movie Western towns. Linguere Ramatou arrives on a steam train, as in a movie Western, and we have present in the town the Mayor (government), the schoolteacher, and the sheriff. There is also a scene in a church, characters who wear boots and cowboy hats, characters who congregate in a bar (Dramaam's store), characters who tote shotguns, and characters who ride horses. But,

what Mambety shows us is not a civilization that brings order, stability and prosperity as it expands its influence, as suggested by the movie *Western*. Instead, we see that the influence of the West on Africa disrupts an existing civilization, an existing order, existing prosperity, and replaces with poverty, greed, chaos, mob rule and death. This is significant, as it is a departure from the Dürrenmatt source text. As J.R. Rayfield notes in his examination of the film, “in the Swiss town... the town will enjoy its prosperous future, while in the Senegalese town... the town is totally and permanently corrupted” (81). And ultimately, the characters in the film, who believe they are the authors of their own actions and their own future, are the authors of nothing, they are merely actors in a drama authored by an external force. Mambety once remarked about *Hyenas* that Hollywood could not have made the film, no matter how much money it spent on it. The comment, I think, is a revealing one. For in unmasking the lack of authorship of the characters in the film, Mambety shows very clearly a way for Africans to reconcile the tradition/modernity in a way that grants rather than denies them agency, and at the same time as he shows very clearly that an African director can clearly be the author of his film, even when he is working with a Western source text and a Western genre. He takes only what is useful to his purpose, casting aside anything that restricts or constrains his ability to shape the film according to his vision. That is the only test a filmmaker should have to pass when asserting authorship.

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