



Mandabi

Director: Ousmane Sembene

Country: Senegal

Date: 1968

*A review by Peter Bradshaw for **The Guardian**:*

Ousmane Sembène, the “father of African cinema”, tells a tale of Jonsonian bleakness about human nature with his 1968 film *Mandabi*, or *The Money Order*, adapted from his own novella and now on re-release. As with much of the rest of his work, and especially his earlier film *Le Noire De...* (1966), it is about colonialism and Africa’s relationship with France, though a 21st-century audience might specifically read it as a parable of globalisation, and what happens when a poor country exiles its cheap labour to wealthy countries in the expectation of money getting sent home.

Makhourédia Guèye plays Ibrahim: a lazy, conceited man with two wives, Méty (Ynousse N’Diaye) and Aram (Isseu Niang) and seven children in a village outside Dakar, Senegal. The first time we see him, Ibrahim is being shaved by a barber, and getting his gruesome nose hairs trimmed. Later he eats greedily to the point of indigestion and settles down for a nap instead of going to the mosque for prayers; he is always burping, coughing, grimacing, and upon being massaged, appears horribly to break wind.



Then his world is turned upside down by the postman, who announces that Ibrahim has received a letter and a money order for 25,000 francs from his nephew who is living and working in Paris. The interpreter at the post office who later reads this letter out to him reveals that this industrious young man is asking Ibrahim to save 20,000 for him when he returns; give 3,000 to his mother and keep 2,000 for himself.



But Ibrahim can’t cash the money without an ID card and needs to procure all sorts of documents to get one, causing a fatal delay; the exciting news of his sudden riches has brought crooks and predators out of the woodwork – encouraged, of course, by

Ibrahim and his wives themselves who are using the news of this money order to buy things on credit. There are also salesmen (bizarrely, a bra salesman) and beggars both honest and dishonest, whom Ibrahim has to send away, advised by his wives: “If you try to help nine poor people, you will soon become the tenth.” Soon his sister (Thérèse Bas) appears – to whom greedy Ibrahim has not given a moment’s thought since getting the money order – demanding to know where her 3,000 francs is. And with a terrible inevitability, Ibrahim is tricked out of the cash.

The film’s biggest formal coup is the scene in which Sembène gives us a little montage of the nephew’s life in Paris, under his voiceover, in which he earnestly says that he will not “rebel” or “go astray”, but just work hard, because there is no work in Senegal. It is as if Senegal has exported its youth, its idealism and its optimism – and in



return imports cash that causes only bitterness. It is an alienated society. The men are cynics or crooks, or they are simply bewildered and weak like Ibrahim, or simply overcome with a kind of lassitude and ennui: there is a good deal of listless dozing in the sun.

Mandabi features an excellent performance from Guèye, who is innocent and culpable all at once. This is gentle, walking-pace cinema that leads us by the hand from vignette to vignette, from scene to scene, presented to us with ingenuous simplicity and calm.

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