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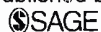
The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 2010 45: 341

DOI: 10.1177/0021989410376219

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Consumption and Dependency in Mandabi

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Abstract

In his 1968 film *Mandabi*, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène warns of the consequences for sovereignty of unrestrained appetite and the easy credit that facilitates it. Sembène's depiction of a poor man whose windfall gift of a money order leads ironically to increased debt, dependency and indignity is a cautionary allegory for his own newly postcolonial nation, which had received its first World Bank loan in 1966. Drawing on work by Frantz Fanon, J-F. Bayart and others, this essay examines the film's critique of the "politics of the belly" in Africa and the effects of credit-fuelled consumerism on subjectivity, sovereignty and aesthetics in a postcolonial context.

Keywords

Sembène, *Mandabi*, consumption, debt, dependency, Africa

In an early scene of Ousmane Sembène's 1968 film *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*), we watch protagonist and patriarch Ibrahima Dieng enjoy an extraordinarily generous feast. He devours an enormous bowl of rice and steaming fish stew, stuffs himself with papaya (he has to drink several large cups of water to make room) and finally, when it seems he can surely eat no more, munches on a cola nut, before collapsing groaning onto his bed. "Allah be praised", he marvels. "I haven't had such a big lunch in ages."¹ Because his body is apparently unused to such quantities of food, the scene is punctuated by his visceral groans, pants, throat-clearings, belches and frequent chest-thumping, and on several occasions he pauses to remove fish bones that have become stuck in his palate. He even intermittently appears to be on the verge of vomiting. The camera lingers on the scene, following Dieng's meal in discomfiting close-up and emphasizing, through

shot composition and camera perspectives, both the vast quantity of food being consumed and the grotesqueries of his consuming body. The first shot, angled downward so that Dieng's mouth and nose form its exact centre, provides an intimate view of his wide-open mouth and the overstuffed hand that delivers an enormous ball of food onto his tongue. His skin, shiny with sweat and the oil applied by his barber in an earlier scene, provides a striking contrast in such close-up with the light-coloured rice and stew that spills out from between his fingers, emphasizing the thematic interplay, established in this scene, between excess, food and the body that opens wide to consume it.

The scene's nauseating effect on the viewer arises from the close-up confrontation with superlative *excess*: the unabashed enthusiasm that this man derives from taking in far more than is proper and giving out (excreting) bodily sounds and sights that surely ought to remain private, hidden from view. Dieng is, however, apparently indifferent to the presence or absence of an audience and seems entirely unashamed by his dietary performance. We are, of course, not the only witnesses to the scene – his wives, Maty and Aram, take turns assisting him during the meal – but their intimate position in the household means that their gaze does not unduly affect Dieng's behaviour. In fact, if anything, their presence serves as a form of encouragement, even compulsion, as he tackles the task of finishing the dishes they present. The wives watch silently as he eats, but their eyes are not envious or hungry, as might be expected in a context where eating (as we learn) is apparently not an everyday occurrence, but rather admiring, respectful: they encourage him to eat more, and seem to derive proud enjoyment from their ability to provide dishes that give him pleasure.

Dieng's capacity to consume everything put in front of him is an important symbolic expression of his potency, given his position as the sovereign patriarch of his polygamous household. The aesthetic of sovereignty, as reflected in this scene – the regime of display associated with demonstrating one's independence – is shown to be precisely excessive, wasteful, even "grotesque": Dieng performs his "majesty" by displaying his enjoyment and his extraordinary power to consume, just as his second wife and five children express his indifference to economy (he is evidently in no position to afford such a large family) and his enthusiastic enjoyment of physical (in this case, erotic) pleasure.

What Dieng does not know – his wives', and the audience's, little secret – is that the food he enjoys at this special feast, and which he spends the rest of the afternoon digesting in a comatose siesta, has been bought on credit from the local grocer. While he was out being shaved and polished by his barber (an experience whose graphically bodily details we are again treated to in the film's opening scene, along with a pointed close-up of the

exchange of coins that marks this service as a business relationship), the postman has delivered a money order for 25,000 CFA francs² to Dieng's wives, along with a letter from his nephew Abdou in Paris. Astonished and overjoyed at this unexpected windfall, and unable to read the details in the accompanying letter, Maty and Aram head immediately for the grocer's, brandishing the money order as evidence of their credit-worthiness: "Today, we will eat." And indeed they do.

These early scenes thus establish a close interconnection between food, the consuming body and monetary debt, which the film is concerned to explicate. As I will argue here, this tragi-comic parable brings together food and money to show the consequences for sovereignty of excesses of appetite. *Mandabi* is Sembène's first colour feature, and the first African film in a local language (Wolof), and the themes he addresses here will be in one way or another central to the eight films that follow, although they have received oddly little attention in the scholarly literature on Sembène specifically and African cinema more generally. Though it appears on first viewing as a simple parable about the troubles confronting a traditional naïf alone in the modern city, *Mandabi* reveals itself to be a complex meditation on the process by which individuals become economic (and thus, necessarily, uneconomical) subjects in a consumer society. Its narrative structure is built upon an apparent paradox, drawn from a "true story" that Sembène discovered in a minor news article: a gift of exceptional wealth to a poor man ironically brings increased poverty, suffering and oppression. Whereas its protagonist hitherto lived a poor but honourable life as a respected elder in the "native quarter" of Dakar, the arrival of his nephew's money order, and the expectation of riches it summons, destabilizes the organic equilibrium that once organized social life in the ghetto, erodes the property ownership and patriarchal authority that underpinned his social identity as an honourable man, and finally casts him out, in a state of disgrace, into the second-order state of nature that characterizes modern monetary life. The promise of riches effectively destroys Ibrahima Dieng long before the promise is fulfilled (an event that remains in potential at the film's final fade to black), but his encounter with these imaginary funds – the gift that is (literally speaking) not one – irrevocably changes him, his sense of self and his place in society.

Throughout this process, it is his ability – or, rather, his inability – to manage his limited resources, to practice the *oikos* on which his survival depends, that underwrites his sovereign autonomy, as both possessive individual and as patriarchal paterfamilias. Here Sembène's critical gaze is raised to the allegorical level of national economic subjectivity, the challenges confronting a new nation emerging into capitalist modernity. *Mandabi* was released in 1968, two years after Senegal accepted its first loan from the World Bank. With the conclusion of this award, a \$9 million

grant to support expansion of the national railroad, the country had finally attained the status of a subject on the international scene, a self-possessed entity capable of concluding contracts and “able to make promises”.³ Most importantly, entering into a loan agreement signalled that the new nation-state could imagine its own future and claim itself responsible for that future, a characteristic that Patrick Brantlinger identifies as fundamental to “public credit”, the credibility and therefore, in modernity, the material reality of the imaginary community and its institutions.⁴ In this case, it seemed that a failure of credit – of creditability as an index of national dignity or “worth” – would threaten the ground of sovereign autonomy more than an excess of credit or indebtedness. As Brantlinger points out, in a very real historical sense, the “founding moments” of “all modern nation-states [...] are identical to the funding of their debts”.⁵ and in Senegal’s case the extension of credit – the recognition of the nation as credit-worthy in the eyes of the world community – seemed to represent the pinnacle of sovereign worth, even (as we shall see) dignity.

But *Mandabi* expresses its director’s deep anxiety about what this will mean for the new nation-state. For Sembène, indebtedness marks the limit of postcolonialism understood as a project aimed at securing sovereignty, a political condition defined in his Fanonian view by autonomy, self-possession and self-determination. In his 1975 lecture *Man is Culture*, Sembène would describe the ideal of liberation struggles against colonial powers as the “infallibl[e] ... right to absolute control of one’s economic and cultural riches ... the right of all people to live off their possessions.”⁶ If anti-colonial movements sought the restoration of the dignity and plenitude – the subjective and political presence – of African people, through this defence of autonomous singularity, Sembène’s films satirize the sham dignity he identifies with indebtedness, underscoring instead the fetishistic structure of national identity and nationalist ideology in a context of neocolonial dependency. After 1966, Sembène suggests, the postcolonial Senegalese state becomes itself a fetish, a simulacrum of sovereign autonomy that conceals the hollowness, the dispossession and indignity at its core. In *Mandabi* we find that excess of enjoyment and an un-economical indifference to its consequences are what pose the gravest threat to sovereign self-possession.

The right to enjoyment is in fact the critical point of contention in Sembène’s political philosophy; against those like Georges Bataille and, subsequently, Achille Mbembe, who argue that spectacular and extravagant pleasure is the sign of and material condition for, sovereignty, Sembène’s films propose that excess of enjoyment (and its monopoly by self-interested elites) is ultimately responsible for Africa’s economic and political plight, and insist that the task of reclaiming African dignity depends on the disavowal of individual pleasure – including the visual pleasure associated

with conventional cinematic spectatorship. Throughout Sembène's *oeuvre*, enjoyment is mediated symbolically through the figure of food, a trope that will provide one of our guiding analytic concepts here. As Celestin Monga points out, eating is an important "symbol of the aesthetics of power" in postcolonial Africa, a key node in the regime of signs through which power expresses and consolidates itself.⁷ The "politics of the belly" described by Jean-François Bayart is, similarly, a mode that sees power as, in Monga's terms, first and foremost "the privileged loc[us] of pleasure where one eats and consumes to one's heart's content".⁸ Bayart's analysis, in *The State in Africa*, of popular euphemisms and other figures through which power and corruption are articulated by ordinary Africans demonstrates the close interrelationship between consumption and domination in the postcolony.⁹ Not only control over the circulation of food, but the theatrical demonstration of such control through feasting, munificence and ornamental display (through commodities like imported cars, foods and drinks, Western clothing, splendid houses and beautiful women) form the basis of political authority in Bayart's African case-studies. This performance of wealth not only displays the fortunate individual's power and what Bataille would call his indifference to utility,¹⁰ but also serves a legitimizing function by symbolically (if not materially) "sharing" his wealth with his wider social network.

Building on Bayart's work, Achille Mbembe shows how this spectacle of enjoyment, the luxury of extravagant pleasure, is absolutely essential to the exercise of authority: "To exercise authority is, furthermore, for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well."¹¹ To be sovereign is to be wasteful, to luxuriate ostentatiously in grotesque physical pleasure. And yet, again, this commanded enjoyment is more than simple (personal) corruption; it forms, in Mbembe's view, the aesthetic substance of sovereign power itself. "[T]he *commandement* must be extravagant", Mbembe indicates, "since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele; it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in dress and lifestyle, turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theater".¹² In short, "the postcolony is a world of anxious virility, a world hostile to continence, frugality, sobriety".¹³

In Sembène's view, this is precisely the problem with postcolonial political life in Africa. While he is unquestionably critical of foreign interference and the West's continued political and economic domination, it is the will to enjoyment on the part of Africa's rulers that he ultimately holds responsible for the failure to achieve the dignity and autonomy that constituted the major goals of the liberation movements. The remainder of this essay will sketch Sembène's political philosophy as it unfolds in his first full-length feature film. Although many of his later films are similarly

concerned with the problem of sovereignty and its relationship to pleasure in postcolonial Senegal, *Mandabi* provides a particularly powerful example of how the film-maker brings together food, erotic and family life, and monetary economy to meditate on the problem of dignified autonomy in a capitalist context.

Mandabi follows Ibrahima Dieng, an unemployed polygamous patriarch with a taste for physical pleasures, on his journeys through the labyrinthine underworld of Senegalese bureaucracy and the city's emerging monetary economy, as he attempts to cash the money order sent to him by his nephew, Abdou, who is working as a street sweeper in Paris. The anticipation of riches that the money order initially precipitates soon gives way to despair, however, as Dieng, lacking documents, finds it impossible to realize the promised funds without proof of his identity. The pursuit of Abdou's money ironically requires various investments (bus fare to the city, fees for documentation, payments to middle-men who intervene on his behalf, even "good luck" gifts to beggars on the streets of Dakar), and this speculation against the expected return gradually sinks the family deeper and deeper into debt, as the illiquid hero must borrow from the grocer (who serves as a sort of local banker), from his relatives and even from his wives, in order to fund his Quixotic endeavour. After undergoing diverse humiliations, Dieng is ultimately swindled out of the money order and, at film's end, seems likely to lose everything – including, most painfully, his house – to his creditors, who turn out to be colluding with his swindler to ruin him.

In this film, Sembène contends that an economy based on credit is one that is essentially unproductive, promoting consumption (and thus, inevitably, waste) over work. This begins almost as soon as the money order arrives. The postman tells Aram and Maty that Dieng can cash it at the post office later that day, and in anticipation of their new-found wealth, they lavishly order – once again on credit – a delivery of water, sparing themselves the effort of fetching and transporting it from the communal faucet. A key shot of the borrowed water being poured into the homestead's storage jar, cascading (at some length) from the top of the screen with no apparent source, into the dark mouth of the jar, highlights the punning disjuncture between the family's fiscal poverty – their illiquidity – and the liquid commodity that flows into their pockets, their thirsty mouths and their dirty bodies, and then, inevitably, into the dust.

All too soon we see Aram and her daughter laboriously fetching more water from the tap. While the commodity-water here momentarily stands in, at least within the symbolic economy of this poor community, for a plenitude of wealth, the satisfaction of desire (as indicated by the flow that fills up the hollow jar, as the borrowed rice and water fill up their hungry bellies), we cannot help feeling uneasy about the ultimate impermanence

of wealth, even (or perhaps especially) the “fictional” wealth of credit,¹⁴ invested in consumables like food and water.

Not only has this commodity been bought on credit, credit that is moreover underwritten by a text that the illiterate family cannot even understand, and whose value might in fact turn out to be fictitious, but it seems to us (and eventually to the women themselves) a particularly wasteful expenditure – a “luxury” in every sense. Of course, *as* a luxury the commodity (in this case, their ability to save themselves the labour of fetching their own water) serves social-symbolic as well as material functions: for Marcel Mauss as for Bataille, luxurious expenditure and ostentatious wastefulness paradoxically serve to “display power, wealth and lack of self-interest” and to secure social prestige and “honour”.¹⁵ And clearly it serves this function for Dieng’s wives, particularly Aram, who relishes her new role as consumer (along with the water, she buys, on credit, a wildly inappropriate piece of beautiful but useless underwear from a peddler) despite the nagging demands for payment that inevitably follow in the days ahead.

In this case, however, claiming social “honour” by proving themselves immune to the constraints of personal necessity, backfires unpleasantly when the responsibilities that attend such social status become evident. As news of the windfall spreads through the neighbourhood, various scavengers arrive to claim their share of the unrealized riches. At this point hospitality itself becomes another luxurious expenditure, a way of claiming social value by giving gifts that, quite literally in this case, cannot be repaid – and which, more importantly, exceed what the giver can “afford” to give. While for some this aspect of hospitality is precisely what makes it a quintessentially ethical practice, for Sembène such ethical questions can never be abstracted from their material context, from the problem of *oikos*. In any case, through the thinly veiled and often duplicitous motivations of those who enjoy Dieng’s hospitality at his expense, Sembène highlights the difficulty of reconciling the abstract ethical imperative with a social context that promotes absolute self-interest.

Dieng lavishly orders his wife to give the leftovers from the sumptuous lunch, which we know the family cannot really spare, to a passing beggar, “so as to ward off evil”. He later gives twenty francs, which he himself has had to borrow, to a woman begging on the street, invoking Muslim injunctions to give alms (and illuminating the fetishistic misrecognition of money’s material agency) by praying “May this coin shield me and my children from evil.” Friends and family drop in to request loans of money and food, and are welcomed hospitably with food and drink (including colonial luxuries like tea, white bread and sugar). In one scene, Dieng breaks off pieces of his own bread to share with his supplicants: his shrinking baguette, his share of which (let alone his wives’ and children’s) grows

smaller and smaller as each guest receives a piece, serves as an ominous reminder of the erosion of their material security. The baguette itself is of course a potent symbol in its own right, one that economically expresses many of Sembène's concerns about the relationship between foreign food and dependency in Africa (a theme he will explore in more depth in his 1992 feature *Guelwaar*). As well as representing an overdetermined expression of how foreign (French) culture and material commodities penetrate the home and body and undermine the investment wealth of African economies (in a way that is insidiously invisible, unremarked – the bread, in this scene, seems taken for granted by the characters as a part of everyday life), the baguette provides little more than empty calories; it is a pleasurable "luxury" that holds little nutritional value: a wasteful expense in a context where every meal must be made to count.

This anti-alchemy, the production of scarcity out of wealth, is intensified by the gift economy that organizes social life in the poor section of town. Despite his protestations, Dieng is unable to convince his neighbours that the money "is not mine" and, it must be said, readily consents to the barrage of advance loan requests, even though he has yet to cash the money order, evidently enjoying his new status as dispenser of gifts and creditor to the neighbourhood. And while this sort of generosity and openness to surprise requests for hospitality and assistance reflect the profoundly ethical basis of Senegal's Islamic and traditional social relations, in this film their effects, in a context of radical scarcity *and*, more crucially, in the face of a hegemonic consumer economy and individualist ethos, are called into serious question. Dieng's "guests" rapidly become parasites, camped out at his doorstep waiting for the promised loans to materialize despite his insistence that the money does not belong to him. The desperate woman he helps on the streets of Dakar turns out to be a professional beggar, who approaches him for a second gift less than an hour after he gave her twenty francs – and is defiantly unashamed when he recognizes her ("I am a decent woman," she insists).¹⁶ And while Dieng increasingly acknowledges and deplores the ubiquitous beggary he sees around him, wondering "When begging becomes a trade, what will happen to this country?", he of course fails to acknowledge his own complicity in this culture of dependency.

So the food itself, the wastefulness of its consumption and the social economy of expenditure into which it inserts Dieng, together make these early scenes a crucial summary of the broader themes expressed in *Mandabi*. In any event, the result is once again a net loss for the family. Within a few days, the rice, water and other consumables – cooking oil, canned tomatoes, charcoal, and direct cash loans – that they have acquired on credit from the grocer are gone, leaving only the debt, a line of writing in the grocer's ledger book, as a trace.

Maty and Aram at least soon recognize the threat this gift-economy poses to their own family's sustenance and they conspire to hide bags of precious rice from their prodigal husband and his rapacious guests. By blocking the flow of food and other gifts through the community and resisting the culture of dependency that they recognize is springing up around the money order – and although they themselves initially fell under the seductive spell of luxurious consumption – the women ultimately lay claim to, and stridently defend, the autonomy and integrity of their household. They recognize that their dignity, their social “worth”, can only be sustained if they impose a limit on their indebtedness and carve out a space, however infinitesimal, outside the demands of the social marketplace. “Property protects us only from dishonour, not death”, Aram says, as she gives her necklace to Dieng to pawn, warding off the shame of being unable to pay his sister her share of Abdou's money order.

We should perhaps pause to reflect upon the origins of the francs that are so rapidly being “eaten up” by these variously pleased bodies and mouths. Although the fetishistic structure of the money order, like that of all money, invites us and its recipients to forget that it has a history, the funds are in fact marked with the sweat and tears of migrant labour. As in his next film, *Xala* (1975), Sembène is concerned here with articulating that concealed history and exploring some of the consequences of its repression. We learn through a flashback sequence, with voice-over narration provided by Sembène himself (appearing in cameo as a professional letter-reader employed by Dieng – on credit, naturally – to read the note that came with the money order), that the money order represents the savings of Dieng's nephew, a young Dakarais who has gone to Paris to find work, “because there are no jobs in Dakar”. Abdou is the voice (uttered, we should emphasize, in Sembène's own physical voice) of unwavering self-reliance in the film – unlike so many other characters, including his family, he rejects the culture of dependency that he identifies as pervasive in the country. “Do not think that I came here to France to be a bum”, he proudly insists, describing in glowingly positive terms what must surely be a life of extreme hardship, self-denial and loneliness. “I cannot remain day in, day out, all my life without a job”, he tells his uncle, who apparently does just this, “waiting for handouts or leftovers from others”.

Abdou has gone to France hoping to “make some money and learn a trade” in order to provide him with the financial security he needs to get married and start a family. In the meantime, he endures a solitary bachelor existence, devoid of even the erotic pleasures available to more fortunate young men. He works all day and studies at night, and yet somehow manages to deny himself any enjoyment of the presumably microscopic returns on his labour, which are instead accumulated, gathered together, fragment by fragment, and sent home, in his stead. Superfluous to the modernizing

economy of independent Senegal, and unable there to escape what he regards as the indignities of dependency and charity, Abdou ironically finds himself sweeping the streets of Paris, steering its dirt, trash and other useless matter along the gutters, down into the sewers and back out to sea, where they presumably enter the circuits of Atlantic tides and perhaps eventually wash up on shore back home in Dakar.

Trading on this trope of monetary circulation as a liquid economy, we can say that his remittances, too, function as a kind of waste matter, the surplus value he has extracted from his own labour as a manager of waste in the metropolitan centre, in order to send payments home to his mother and uncle. This is the closest the entire narrative comes to truly productive labour – and to a genuine altruistic spirit – and it is notable that the marginal profit in this case is derived almost exclusively from the circulation of waste and superfluity, from moving things around, rather than making something genuinely new. The connection between money and excrement that Freud identified finds literal instantiation in this glimpse behind the money order's gleaming exterior: waste matter is alchemically transmuted, through labour, into gold – or, at least, into paper credit. It is also, of course, a capitalization of repressed libidinal energies, a representation of pleasure not enjoyed ("not a drop of alcohol will pass my lips"), and a proud public statement of his individual worth, his status as gift-giver, in the symbolic economy to which his identity is staked.¹⁷ Abdou and his unpleasured body are the point of origin for the 25,000-franc money order that generates the film's plot, but they are also its secret, the dis-remembered material ground of the fetishistic credit economy into which Dieng is plunged.

He asks Dieng to give a portion of the funds to his mother, offers his uncle a gift of several thousand francs ("because I know you don't have a job") and asks that he keep the remainder in trust pending Abdou's return to Senegal. Abdou is committed to saving enough to buy a home and eventually marry and has therefore sacrificed his present enjoyment for the future security he envisions. The dignity accorded Abdou is therefore that of the proprietary individual, one who possesses himself by living not only within his means, but well below them: capable of mastering his appetites to such an extent that he is able to extract surplus value from his own labours. Although his life in Paris is unquestionably nasty, lonely and likely short, Abdou in this way serves as Sembène's representative of the ideal sovereign subject, one who can rationally envision, plan for, and work to achieve his own ideal future – a future of absolute autonomy and self-determination.

So although the money order is addressed to Dieng, the money it represents is, as he constantly reminds those who would claim a share, "not mine". The film's title is a Wolof transliteration of the French "mandate",

and indeed the “money order” serves in this case as a kind of demand or authorization, a “mandate” that alienates and transfers Abdou’s authority over his funds to his uncle. The money is not, in other words, a gift, but has been transferred to Dieng in trust. His interest in the money order is not even “proprietary,” except in his capacity as executor of Abdou’s instructions, as his elected representative, if you will. He is subject to it, rather than master of it – a “monetary subject, but without money”.¹⁸

This gap between representation and concrete reference, a form that is inherent to the money form and thus to credit and other forms of “fictional capital”, is elaborated in *Mandabi* into the structure of identity itself in a modern, monetary economy. As in the shrinking baguette scene, being subject to the money order not only proliferates Dieng’s debts and his destructive enjoyment, but also eats away at the security and stability that underwrite his sense of self. The postman tells the family that they can cash the money order at the post office, a task he expects to take no longer than an afternoon. Once again trading on the promise of riches to come, Dieng borrows money from the grocer, Mbarka, and sets out into Dakar to cash the order. In order to do so, he is told at the post office, he needs an identity card, “something with [his] picture on it”. He does not have one. In order to get an ID card, he needs a birth certificate, three photographs and fifty cents. He does not have a birth certificate and the officious City Hall clerks will not issue one without a specific date of birth – Dieng only knows that he was born “sometime around 1900”. The money order has set off a cascade of textual deferral, a provisionally comic reflection of what we could call the *différance* of identity under pressure from a social and economic order based on credit.

In the more traditional community he is used to, where his word and his face, his recognizability, are enough to guarantee exchange and other social transactions, Dieng occupies a position of some importance. In the eyes of the urban, French-speaking and resolutely “modern” bureaucratic functionaries, by contrast, he lacks both credibility and, by extension, creditability. His physical face is not enough – his identity needs to be confirmed, ironically, with a representation: a photo attached to the official identity card. Similarly, his “word” (for example, his claim to have been born “sometime around 1900”: his claim to be who he says he is) is meaningless here: as an oral form, it is quite literally illegible and therefore unverifiable in the eyes of the state, rendering his very existence a matter of doubt (that is, incredible).¹⁹ His credit-worthiness, his creditability, is in this economy a direct extension of his credible existence as an official member of the polity, and this status, the very basis of participation in the modern economy itself, is consequently denied to him. He cannot attain material wealth (“property”) until he has established his status as a “proprietary” individual, a political citizen in full possession of his rational

faculties, as symbolized by the granting of documents like a passport or, in this case, an identity card.²⁰ But this proprietary status in turn depends, in this modern milieu, on his ownership of property, as demonstrated by his inability to deal with the bureaucracy that yields readily to the efforts of his wealthier intercessors.

Dieng rapidly runs out of cash, even as his debts are piling up at home, and must ask his Westernized nephew for assistance. This nephew, who apparently has some contacts in the bureaucracy, intervenes on his behalf at City Hall and generously helps him out with gifts of some change and a cheque, which only poses new problems for Dieng when he tries to cash it at the bank. Unfamiliar with the ritual procedures associated with a credit economy (like cashing a cheque), he is swindled by a broker who lurks at the bank's entrance, evidently waiting for naïve customers such as Dieng to fall into his hands. This man, who wears a Western suit, speaks French and has friends among the cashiers at the bank, is another none-too-subtle representative of Senegal's new "native bourgeoisie", and a bleak expression of the unproductive profiteering, verging on outright plunder, that characterizes this rentier class.²¹ Though Dieng regards the broker's assistance in cashing the cheque despite his lack of identity papers as an altruistic service, rendered by one citizen to another, he must ultimately pay a usurious "fee" of 300 francs, and realizes that he has been robbed, albeit in the most polite way possible. He then tries to secure the required photographs for his ID card, but is duped by con artists who pretend to take his picture, demand payment in advance and then feign ignorance when he arrives to collect the pictures: another successful speculative venture for Senegal's new informal financiers, and another humiliating failure for Dieng, who ends up hunched over on the street, blood dripping from his nose into the dust, after he attempts to defend his investment, and his honour, against these thieves.

The grocer, Mbarka, publicly refuses to extend him further credit, but behind the scenes brokers a usurious loan from one of his backroom cronies, who are, as it turns out, conspiring to acquire Dieng's house. When he learns of their designs on his home, Dieng is outraged and even gets into a scuffle with Mbarka and his fellow speculators. "To be poor, I can accept", he cries, "To be homeless, never!" The pride of homeownership is explicitly associated, in this scene, with the question of a man's "dignity," understood as his capacity, as sovereign, to rule over himself and his passions, his interfering wives and his property – to manage his debts by managing his symbolic authority, the creditability, on which his solvency is grounded. Being a homeowner is the frame within which this dignity is articulated; to surrender his independence, his sovereign authority over his domestic space, is for Dieng the ultimate humiliation – a moment that allows Sembène to make a broader allegorical point about

the political indignity of African dependency and its implications for national sovereignty.

Confronted by a vertiginous proliferation of missing documents that interpose between him and the payout promised in another document (the money order), Dieng becomes increasingly bewildered, to the point of physical vertigo, and, desperate for guidance, eventually turns to Mbarka's associate, the suspiciously helpful but sinister Mbaye Sarr, who invites him to visit him at home. During their meeting, we overhear a telephone conversation confirming that Mbaye is only interested in acquiring Dieng's house, but because they speak in French, which Dieng cannot understand, he remains ignorant of the falsity of Mbaye's genial exterior. The dramatic irony thus established, in which thanks either to subtitles or our own cosmopolitan polylingualism, we have access to knowledge that is denied to our monolingual hero, serves to disrupt our identification with Dieng and to establish him as an object, rather than a subject, of our gaze. From this point forward, we pity him, or fear for the inevitability of his undoing, but we no longer truly feel *with* him.

Sarr arranges for Dieng to sign a document giving him power of attorney over his affairs (once again, we witness credit's power to alienate proprietary subjectivity: in the interest of acquiring more property, Dieng here signs over his sovereign authority and becomes, in a legal sense, a minor – a dependant) and promises to cash the money order on his behalf. When Dieng returns the next morning to collect his money, Mbaye is at breakfast (imported coffee and croissants), which he fails to offer to share with Dieng. More odiously, though, he reports that he has been pickpocketed on his way from the post office and the funds are gone. It is clear that he has concocted this story, as Dieng's wives did the previous day, to divert suspicion from himself and that he has simply stolen the 25,000 francs. Despite Dieng's desperate, abject pleas, hands clasped on his knees, incredulously imploring the thief to confess the truth, reminding him that "the money isn't mine". Mbaye is studiously unmoved and deposits his victim back at his compound, tossing a token bag of rice into the dusty street behind the car as a sort of compensation for the misappropriated funds before driving off.

Once again, food is the material and symbolic nexus through which social, economic and political relations – in this case, relations of dispossession, deceit, dependency and consumption – are mediated. As Dieng sits abjectly in the street, his head in his hands, contemplating his disgrace, a throng of women with bowls descends on the rice like scavengers. Their hands greedily reach into the bag, grabbing what they can before Maty and Aram arrive to drive them away. Once again, the women police the boundaries of personal dignity and rescue their husband from his shamefully dirty condition and position. They raise him to his feet and take him inside, where he shares the news with them. When the women wail at the loss of

the money, he angrily rebukes them by pointing out that the money was never theirs to begin with. The more fundamental loss, he insists, is that of his faith in the honourable ground of social relations in contemporary Senegal, not to mention the loss of dignity and security that he has suffered as a result of this experience. Decrying the fact that "decency has become a sin in this country", he resolves to become a "wolf among wolves", adding "I, too, will become a thief and a liar."

The Hobbesian turn taken by Dieng at the film's conclusion is only appropriate, for it seems likely that he will soon be evicted from his home, cast out of the social and political community that has hitherto sheltered him (and depended on him), and that he will be forced to make his way in the dog-eat-dog economy of the modern city that, in Sembène's account, resembles a Hobbesian state of nature. The final realization of the non-negotiability of his debt, that he now inhabits something like debt as the state of his being, spells the end of his status as sovereign individual, the master of his body, family and property. We are invited to read Dieng's fate as a cautionary tale about the prospects for Senegalese independence in a context of foreign debt.

Although reviews of the film tend to characterize it as a "comedy" in the absurdist tradition,²² and despite a somewhat puzzling last-minute attempt at a "happy ending", the plot of *Mandabi* is undeniably tragic, a narrative of its sacrificial hero's fall from proud and dignified independence into homelessness, dependency and cynicism. It is a painful story, if we have sympathized, however briefly, with the protagonist and, if so, the marketing and reception of the film as a comedy is disjunctive. As an account of a shameful fall into modern political, economic and social relations, where Dieng is drawn under the gaze of bureaucratic officials and predatory lenders in order, ultimately, to be rendered invisible by them, *Mandabi* offers at least two points of view, each of which renders its own generic interpretation. If we align ourselves with Dieng, and subject ourselves vicariously to the humiliations he suffers as he struggles to fulfil his commitment to his nephew, we must lament the loss that remains at film's end. We are, to some extent, invited to read this way, despite Dieng's admittedly foolish arrogance and comic naiveté: the filmic discourse employed here might be characterized as "free indirect", shot largely from Dieng's point of view and even offering glimpses into his inner thoughts and sentiments through voice-over soliloquy. Although he is occasionally unsympathetic, the camera offers Dieng as a screen on which to project the viewer's own desires and expectations, along with our more or less conscious sense of alienation from the modern milieu into which he is drawn over the course of the film. He is our representative, the figure onto which we cathect our libidinal energies.

And yet full cathexis proves impossible. The gap between our desire to identify ourselves with Dieng – that is, to desire his desire – and the

undeniable excess of our desires over his own, interrupts the process of identification and produces a shocking estrangement. At certain moments in the narrative, dramatic irony reminds us that we know much more than he does, a realization that is both pleurably reassuring and disturbingly distancing. Reading it as a comedy only succeeds, I suggest, if the viewer effectively participates in the regime of shaming to which the hero is subjected over the course of the film – only if, that is to say, we *enjoy ourselves* at Dieng's expense. Our discomfited squirming as he enjoys his meal, in the early scene discussed above, gives way (if we consent to the film's "comedic" effect) to our sadistic enjoyment of *his* squirming, as he writhes pitifully, humiliatingly, in the dust upon learning that the money is lost and that he is ruined. The moment at which he attains full "knowledge" of the predatory system into which the money order has flung him, the end of his naive self-presence, is ironically (or tragically) the moment at which he is fully dispossessed, when he loses the "property" on which his proprietary subjectivity depends. He recognizes the alienating effects of the monetary economy only at the moment when he is fully alienated, when he signs away his right to make decisions for himself.

In reading *Mandabi* as "comedy," then, we recognize Dieng's shameful lack of self-recognition even as we misrecognize our own status as proprietary modern subjects. We are entertained rather than moved (or vicariously shamed) by his fumbling forays into monetarized modernity, a context in which we, as worldly-wise urban filmgoers with disposable income to spare, will be entirely at home. But if we insist on recognizing in Dieng's humiliations our own corruption by the seductions and necessities of modern monetary life, then we cannot help but read *Mandabi* as a tragedy, a sad yet edifying lesson in the dangers of excessive enjoyment.

As the loss of home that attends Dieng's final dispossession (and his full transformation into a monetary, though penniless, subject) suggests, being "at home" in a consumer economy necessarily means being homeless – that is to say, deracinated, uprooted and sent forth on the uncertain waters of finance. Consumers need to be mobile, flexible and mutually exchangeable; they must be set free from the limitations of (especially landed) property. As *Mandabi* makes painfully clear, this kind of "freedom" is, however, incompatible with dignity: having passed through capitalism's digestive machine, Dieng has become subject to the money he once desired, and now forms part of the system's abject remainder – its waste product, its "reserve army." His desire for enjoyment has become his productive capacity itself: by facilitating the circulation and expansion of speculative wealth, his aspiration to share in their sovereign excess keeps men like Mbarka and Mbaye in business, while perpetually (and ironically) preventing the full realization of his ultimate goal – propertied, dignified self-possession. In this way, the figure of Ibrahima Dieng, comic fool and tragic hero, reflects

Sembène's assessment of the postcolonial state and its leaders, and his all-too-accurate vision of the path that would be taken by his country and other African nations in the decades ahead.

NOTES

- 1 References to the film are from *Mandabi (The Money Order)*, DVD, directed by Ousmane Sembène (1968; New York: New Yorker Home Video, 2005). All translations of quoted dialogue are drawn from the theatrical subtitles.
- 2 The CFA franc is the common currency of twelve former French colonies in West Africa, along with Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea. It has a fixed exchange rate against the French franc, currently (early 2010) standing at 1 euro = 655.957 CFA francs. The money order for CFA 25,000 thus represents around US\$50 in 2010 currency; in 1964-5, this would have represented a typical monthly salary for an industrial worker in Dakar, though many workers would have earned less than 17,000 CFA francs per month. See Guy Pfefferman, *Industrial Labor in the Republic of Senegal*, New York: Praeger, 1968, p.161.
- 3 Nietzsche makes the ability to make promises the basis of sovereign subjectivity, which he sees as the capacity to project oneself into the future through mastery of the body and its immediate desires, Friedrich Nietzsche, "'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscience,' and Related Matters", *On The Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, p.38.
- 4 "'Public credit' [...] refers to the faith a society or 'public' has in itself to prosper or in the future – presumably eternal – power and glory of a given nation-state", Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996, p.29.
- 5 *ibid.* Brantlinger's detailed example treats the founding of the Bank of England in 1694 and the role of the national debt (and its converse, public credit) in the ascendancy of the British nation-state in the eighteenth century and beyond.
- 6 Ousmane Sembène, *Man Is Culture*, Bloomington: African Studies Program, Indiana University, 1979, pp.10; 11-12.
- 7 Celestin Monga, "Let's Eat: Banquet Aesthetics and Social Epicurism", in *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, ed. Sarah Nuttall, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006, p.230.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Bayart examines the "big men" syndrome, along with a range of other popular maxims and expressions that reflect the symbolic conjuncture of food and power in Africa: the Cameroonian party that called itself "I chop you chop" ("I eat you eat"); the cynical observation that corruption is a fact of life, since "the goat grazes where he is tethered"; and so on. Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly*, trans. Mary Harper, Christopher and Elizabeth Harrison, New York: Longman, 2003.
- 10 See especially Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vols. 2 and 3: *The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Zone Books, 1993.
- 11 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p.110.

$$12 \cdot 11 \cdot 10 \cdot 9 \cdot 8 \cdot 7 \cdot 6 \cdot 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1$$

$$11 \cdot 10 \cdot 9 \cdot 8 \cdot 7 \cdot 6 \cdot 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1$$

$$(11 \times 11) \times 10!$$

$$2 \times 5$$

$$2 \times 5$$

$$2 \times 5$$

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- 12 *ibid.*, p. 109.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 110.
- 14 See Karl Marx, "Credit and Fictitious Capital", *Capital*, Vol. III, tr. David Fernbach, London and New York: Penguin, 1991.
- 15 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls, New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, pp.16, 37.
- 16 In fact, when Dieng recognizes the woman and attempts to shame her by insisting on declaiming this recognition, shaking her by the shoulders and loudly accusing her of fraudulent appeals ("you're wearing the same clothes!", he fumes indignantly), she turns the tables on him. "Stop making advances on me", she says, and, conscious of others within earshot who might overhear this potentially shameful accusation, Dieng has no choice but to release her. The shameful have become the shameless – and the shaming – in the city's individualist ethos. This episode, in which the woman alternately assumes the figure of beggar, actress and prostitute, also prepares us for the fuller investigation of the relationship between monetary and erotic exchange in *Xala* and *Guelwaar*.
- 17 See Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 9, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, London: Hogarth, 1953-79; and "Dreams in Folklore", *ibid.*, Vol. 12. Abdou's invocation of moral and physical self-discipline as the basis of accumulation also of course recalls Max Weber's famous analysis of the ideological complicity of capitalism and Christianity in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells, New York: Penguin, 2002.
- 18 Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas*, London: New York: Verso, 2001, p.56.
- 19 Sembène seems to be sketching what Deidre Lynch refers to "character's changing conditions of legibility" in a nascent monetary economy, Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.1.
- 20 For a brilliant account of the relationship between "property" and "propriety", see J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- 21 As in other films, Sembène draws here on Frantz Fanon's critique of bourgeois nationalism, which emphasizes the rentier class's dependence on intermediary activities and the "crumbs" of First World investment. See *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- 22 John Frazer calls *Mandabi* "a comedy about a pompous old bumbler living in Dakar and his misadventures following the receipt of a money order" and notes that "the film resembles a French farce". rev. *Film Quarterly*, 23,4 (1970), 48. Roger Greenspun describes the film as a "comedy"; while recognizing that what initially seems "funny" – Dieng's difficulties – eventually "by sheer accumulation [...] turn sour, and terrifying", "Film Festival: 'Mandabi'", *The New York Times*, 30 September 1969, p. 41. In a follow-up review, a year later, Greenspun calls *Mandabi* a "bitter comedy". "'Mandabi,' Bitterly Comic Film, Returns". *The New York Times*, 27 March, 1970, p.22.

$$3 \cdot 6 \cdot 9 \cdot 12 \cdot 15 \cdot 18 \cdot 21$$

$$3 \times 4 = 12$$

$$3 \times 5 = 15$$

$$4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$$

$$24$$

$$\frac{2}{3} -$$

$$\frac{3}{4} \frac{1}{12}$$

$$126 \times 5x - 13 = 12 - 5x$$

$$126 \times 5x - 13 = 12 - 5x$$

$$126 \times 5x - 13 = 12 - 5x$$

$$\frac{120}{120}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$11 - (1) - (7) - 2$$

$$10 - 7 - 2$$

$$3 - 2$$

$$\frac{1}{4} = 7 \div 4$$

$$1 \times 4 = 4$$

$$1 \times 4 = 4$$

$$\frac{3}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$$