

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## ADVANCE FACT SHEET

- PROGRAM:** SENEGAL: FIFTEEN YEARS OF AN AFRICAN CINEMA, 1962-1977
- DATES:** January 26 - February 27, 1978  
The Museum of Modern Art's Roy and Niuta Titus Auditorium
- DIRECTOR:** Larry Kardish, Associate Curator, Department of Film  
The Museum of Modern Art
- CONTENTS:** Today there are fifteen recognized independent Senegalese filmmakers whose works have been shown at film festivals around the world: the Festivals of Locarno, Karlovy Vary, Berlin, Tours, Cannes, Dakar, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Carthage, Venice, and Ethiopia. (A complete list of directors and films is attached.)

The festival at The Museum of Modern Art represents the first attempt to introduce the American public to African cinema and provides an historical survey of the creative film talents of one developing nation. The most prominent and honored of the filmmakers is Ousmane Sembène, and a full retrospective of his work will be included.

### American Premieres:

The new Sembène film "Ceddo," which has not yet opened in Senegal, where it has encountered some delay because of licensing, will have its American premiere. Another scheduled is "The Hyena's Laugh," made with the "anarchial playfulness" of its director Djibril Diop-Mambéty. This director is also responsible for the premiere film "Badou Boy," a comedy about a bow-legged policeman pursuing a youth in Dakar in a series of brilliant slapstick situations. The fourth film premiering here is "Kaddu Beykat" ("News from the Village") made last year by Safi Faye, the only Senegalese woman filmmaker.

**BACKGROUND** Located on the westernmost tip of Africa, Senegal, which became an independent nation in 1960, is geographically closer than Europe to the Western Hemisphere. With a population of five million, it is comprised of at least five indigenous ethnic groups speaking as many different languages. The Senegalese have had to assimilate an Arab legacy, dating back to the tenth century, its own African culture, as well as the European traditions of the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French. France continues to have an abiding influence at the same time that a compelling process of Westernization is evident. These diverse currents in Senegalese society emerge in one form or another in its movies. The question of identity is frequently explored, particularly by Ousmane Sembène whose latest film is the highly controversial "Ceddo."

### Earliest African Films:

Cinema came to Africa as early as 1896 when a primitive projector was "stolen" from the London Alhambra Palace and turned up in South Africa. Soon after, a number of South African cinemas opened--called "bioscops"

(more)

after the Warwick bioscop of the turn of the century. Nine years later, in 1905, the first films were shown in Dakar, now the capital of Senegal. That same year, in Algiers, an early cinematographer for the Lumiere Brothers made "The Prayer of the Muezzin" and other documentaries. As Guy Hennebelle, an authority of African cinema points out, it was impossible for Europeans to give a realistic picture of conditions in Africa since it would have meant "also showing the dark side of colonization." Africa, until recently, served mainly as an exotic backdrop for "cannibals, heathens, witch doctors, animals, disease, and ignorance" with adventure and romance that was rife and ran the gamut from "Trader Horn" to "Tarzan."

#### Early Senegalese Filmmaking:

The first Senegalese films concerned emigres, students, and workers abroad. One of the first African filmmakers, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, was educated at the Institute des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques in Paris. He founded an African film group, which in 1953 started the short "Afrique sur Seine," only to complete it ten years later. To quote from an excellent survey by Hannes Kamphausen, "'Afrique sur Seine' deals with the bitterness of emigration, deracination, alienation--all themes to stay with African film."

#### SENEGALESE FILMMAKING TODAY

The awkward position of the African caught between his own culture and that of Europe recurs in all of the work of Sembène who is called "a master of African neo-realism," and of whom Kamphausen says: "always in skin-to-skin touch with his people, he focuses on social flaws and corruption and is basically trying to awaken pride in Africa's own past." In his film "Emitai" he portrays women as less submissive and more valiant than men. Indeed it is one of Sembène's cherished ideas that the future will depend to a large extent on African women.

**Style:** Apart from receiving their training in France, African cineastes have been exposed to French, Italian, Russian, Indian, and Egyptian movies, but they are all searching to find their own ways and personal styles, using for the most part African languages. The non-professional actors in their pictures, more at ease in their own tongue, provide authenticity that contributes to the Africanization of African film.

#### Distribution and Production:

The conditions of cinema differ in each African nation, but distributions and theatres remain largely in European hands, and African films, while shown in cine-clubs, embassies, and cultural centers, are sometimes excluded from commercial theatres that play films from the West and some Arab and Indian films which have more mass appeal. The internationally acclaimed films from Africa are seldom shown, and when they are, they receive small recompense because so many "low quality" films from abroad are dumped on the market.

The African films have to meet stiff competition. However, the French Foreign Service has given substantial technical and financial assistance to Senegalese filmmakers, whose films are almost always processed in Paris. Notable is the fact that, while there is a growing number of film directors, a shortage exists of cameramen and sound engineers, not

to mention a lack of private capital. Now, with more movie houses owned by Africans and governmental aid promised, it is hoped that African filmmakers recognized abroad will be equally respected at home.

Senegal, despite the inadequacies and ambiguities of some of its pictures, has set an admirable example for other African nations, thus it was chosen for the Museum's first venture into the African world of cinema.

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