

LE FRANC and LA PETITE VENDEUSE DE SOLEIL

Notes for Viewing the Films

Before the films...

Read the essay on [Le Franc](#) and [La petite vendeuse de Soleil](#).

First notice that *Le Franc* is the first segment of a compilation tape [Three Tales from Senegal](#) which includes two additional shorts.

The two films in this program form the first two parts of, the late Senegalese master Djibril Diop Mambety's uncompleted trilogy, *Tales of Ordinary People*.

Participants will get more out of a screening if you can explain the economic situation that forms the invisible but inescapable backdrop of both these films. Both films are set against the background of the periodic devaluations of the CFA (pronounced "Sifa"), the currency in much of former French West Africa, by the unilateral decision of French bankers at the behest of the World Bank. (There are about 400 CFA to the dollar and 66 to the French Franc.) Devaluation renders all imports, whether components or finished goods, suddenly more expensive. This can have a devastating impact on an economy like Senegal's which is highly dependent on foreign capital and inputs. At the same time, a country's exports become comparatively cheaper and, theoretically, more marketable outside the country. Devaluation also can increase the value of a country's overseas debt because that debt will usually be denominated in "hard" currencies like the US dollar or British pound. In *La petite vendeuse de Soleil* viewers will notice imported refrigerators sitting in the market, too expensive to sell now, and in *Le Franc* Marigo says they must "eat African" since European food now costs too much.

In both films there are conspicuous references to Yadikoon, a semi-legendary figure who in popular memory became a kind of Senegalese Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. In *Le Franc*, the main character, Marigo has a poster of Yadikoon in his room. Mambety himself named a foundation he established for Dakar's street children after Yadikoon.

After the film . . .

With a highly deliberate film artist like Mambety, it is often useful to begin by discussing particular scenes rather than general impressions. This structures discussion around what the filmmaker is actually saying and, just as importantly, how he is trying to say it. It can also help reinforce viewers' screening of the film. First and last scenes often reveal a film's message.

1. You might start with the last scene screened, the final shots of *La petite vendeuse de Soleil*. Some viewers may find this an abrupt ending, dropping the story where a Hollywood film would bring it to a clearer resolution. Why do the vendors scatter as Sili Laam (the little girl) and Babou Seck (her helpful friend) approach and we only hear their footsteps? What is the meaning of Sili's final words in the film, "We continue"?
2. You might next analyze the first scene or "prologue" to *La petite vendeuse de Soleil*, the arrest of the woman in the marketplace (and her subsequent release from jail). Viewers should first notice that the scene is staged rather like an arena: the market people are circled around witnessing the woman's humiliation. Significantly; they do nothing to support her; they just enjoy the spectacle. Is Mambety suggesting a parallel between the market people with the actually viewing audience and asking us to be more sympathetic and less detached?
3. The woman protests that she is "not a thief." She says that the country is crazy and that she is a displaced princess. Senegal is her land by right and, yet, she has been rendered a beggar in it. Is she crazy or speaking the truth? Who is the real thief -- the Senegalese poor or an international monetary system that callously devalues their currency?
4. Why has Mambety picked as the heroine of this film, a child, a female, a member of a despised social caste (*Laam* is often the name of those who handle animal skins - outcasts in many cultures) and a paraplegic? Is Mambety suggesting a comparison between Sili Laam's disabilities and the disadvantages of a capital-poor Africa trying to compete in the world market? Sili Laam has no resources but her energy and resiliency; she doesn't even have a boom box like the man in the wheelchair; she can't even walk as easily as the other newspaper vendors.
5. How does Mambety characterize the world of the Dakar market where most of the film is set? Economists have described a market economy as, "the war of all against all;" is this born out in the social relations of the people in the marketplace? The boys do not relate to Sili Laam, as an equally needy co-worker, but merely as unneeded competition. Is Mambety drawing a parallel between their bullying and the way industrialized nations treat developing nations in the world market?

6. Now that you've discussed how Mambety in *La petite vendeuse de Soleil* makes the Dakar market into a metaphor for the global economy, you can see if he follows a similar strategy in *Le Franc*. In what sense are Senegal and other poor nations caught in a global lottery symbolized by the arbitrary CFA devaluation? Does playing the lottery represent hope or despair? Compare the lottery to Yadikoon's redistributive economic strategy and Sili Laam's economic program of self-reliance.

7. The last shot of *Le Franc* is even more ambiguous than that of *La petite vendeuse de Soleil*. What do you think Marigo will do with his winnings? Will he invest in a business, try to live out his fantasies or share his gains with other poor people as Sili Laam did?

8. What does it mean that at the same time he finds the lottery ticket (or it washes up on his head) the poster of Yadikoon sinks into the sea? Is Marigo laughing at his good fortune or at the absurdity of his situation? He sits as the waves crash over him (the first shot of the film is also of breakers). Do these waves symbolize dynamic change or hopeless repetition?

9. In *La petite vendeuse de Soleil* the newspaper vendors cluster around a ferry dock marked "Goree." Goree Island was one of the most famous "slave castles" in West Africa from where enslaved peoples were deported to the Americas. What is the relationship of slavery to the marketplace? What does Goree represent for the thousands of African Americans who make a pilgrimage there? How might it have a different significance to the Senegalese?

10. When you see a film by Mambety most viewers immediately recognize that its style is unique. But what makes it so? While the realism in the film exposes poverty and oppression, the folk tale aspects perhaps suggest fantastical ways of overcoming them (i.e. little girls getting people released from prison, winning big with the lottery). Is the tension between realism and fable convincing or disturbing? What does Mambety suggest - through the character of Sili Laam - that we add to realism to achieve social change?

11. The last line of the film is a voice over: "This tale is thrown to the sea. The first to breathe it will go to heaven." At the end of this, his last film, Mambety acknowledges that he and the audience are partners in any film: "*When a film ends or 'falls into the ocean' as we say, it creates dreams, it has an energy and direction of its own . . . Audiences are free to take their own path to enter or to leave.*" Who ultimately determines the interpretation, fate, and social impact of a film?

Country facts in brief:

SENEGAL

Location: Western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania

Capital: Dakar

Independence: April 4, 1960 (from France); August 20, 1960 (from Mali Federation)

Population: 9,723,149 (1998)

Ethnic groups: Wolof (44%), Tukulor, Serer, Jola, Malinke

Languages: French (official), Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, Mandingo

Economy/Labor: Agriculture (78%), industry (22%)

GDP per capita: \$1850 (1997)