

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE MONEY ORDER / Mandabi (1968)

Ousmane Sembène

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Senegalese Writer, producer, and director Sembène Ousmane was born on January 1, 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal. He died on June 9, 2007, in Dakar, Senegal. Sembène attended both a Qur'anic school and a French school until age thirteen. He then worked with his father, a fisherman, before moving to Dakar in 1938, where he did a number of odd jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the corps of Senegalese *Tirailleurs* (sharpshooters) and sent to France to fight in the Free French Forces. In 1944 and 1947, Sembène was involved in union strikes, respectively, in Senegal as a railroad worker, and in France as a dock worker and member of the Communist Party. Having dropped out of school early, Sembène had to teach himself to read and write properly. He went on to write several novels, some of which he adapted into films. Sembène's only film training was one year spent at the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, at the age of forty, under Soviet director Mark Donskoy. Sembène, who liked to refer himself as a griot, an African storyteller and historian, produced nine features: *Black Girl* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitaï* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1977), *Camp Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelwar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2001), *Moolaadé* (2003).

**Film** "Mandabi" is the Wolof word for money order. The film, which is entirely filmed in Wolof with a little dialogue in French, is an adaptation of Sembène's 1965 novel of the same title. Five years after Senegal's independence, Sembène offers a criticism of the country's, and Africa's, woes through a tragi-comedic misadventure of his main character, Ibrahima Dieng. Among other topics, *Mandabi* tackles issues of religion, corruption, neocolonial mindset, North-South exchange, polygamy, etc. *Mandabi* was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Biennale di Venezia in 1968.

**Background** *Mandabi* is the first sub-Saharan African feature made in a local language. However, the French National Center for Cinematography, which funded the film, insisted that it be made in French. Thus, Sembène shot *Mandabi* simultaneously in French and in Wolof. Shooting in Wolof was Sembène's way of making the film accessible to the generally illiterate audience of Senegal. Most of *Mandabi*'s cast is constituted by Sembène's friends and family members. The film's main character, Makhouredia Gueye (Ibrahima Dieng) was an accountant by profession and a theater actor. Isseu Niang (Aram, the second wife) sang the recurring theme song.

### CHARACTERS

**IBRAHIMA DIENG** A middle-aged polygamist, who receives a money order from his nephew from Paris.  
**MATY** Ibrahima's first wife  
**ARAM** Ibrahima's second wife  
**MBARKA** The local grocer, who sells things on credit to Ibrahima and his wives.

### SYNOPSIS

Ibrahima Dieng, an unemployed Senegalese man, receives a money order from his nephew, Abdou, who has gone into exile in France, where he works as a street sweeper. This money order, which Ibrahima and his two wives, Maty and Aram, see as a providential solution to their difficulties, turns their lives upside down. To cash the money order, Ibrahima needs an identity card, which he does not have. To obtain this identity card, Ibrahima also needs to obtain a birth certificate, which he has never had. For nine days, Ibrahima travels back and forth unproductively between his village and the public services offices in Dakar, where unmotivated and arrogant officials greet him with disdain. Meanwhile, Ibrahima's wives buy groceries on credit from the local grocer, promising to pay him as soon as their husband cashes in his money order. Also, neighbors, hearing of Ibrahima's sudden fortune, flock to his house to ask for help with money and

food, which Ibrahima promises to provide as soon as he receives his money. Meanwhile, Ibrahima himself is taking out loans left and right, which he intends to pay later with the money. As the prospect of Ibrahima getting his identity card grows ever more unlikely, Ibrahima has only six days left to withdraw the money before it is returned to the sender, and his wives realize that they have incurred more debts than their husband's money order can repay. Panicked and desperate, Ibrahima signs a power of attorney for one of his nephews to cash his money order. The dishonest nephew cheats Ibrahima out of his money, and Ibrahima, disgusted with society, vows to be like everyone else around him: a wolf, a thief and a swindler, in a society of swindlers.

## SCENES

**Life is tough, but one must look good** Ibrahima Dieng is unemployed, but his look is important to him. He goes to the barber to get his head and face shaved. He pays the barber with his last cents and heads home, where his two wives and children have not eaten since this morning.



**A money order for Ibrahima** The mailman has some good news for Ibrahima. He tells Ibrahima's wives that he has a money order for their husband, sent to him by his nephew Abdou, who lives in France. Ibrahima's wives cannot believe their good fortune and tell the mailman to stop giving them false hopes.



**Today, we will eat** The mailman insists that he is serious and hands them also a letter from the same nephew. Convinced, Ibrahima's first wife, Maty, ask her co-wife, Aram, to grab the shopping basket and follow her to the market. She tells her that today is the day that they will eat a good meal. Ibrahima's children are seated around a large plate of rice and are eating like never before. Seated at the foot of his bed, Ibrahima, too, is indulging himself with rice, burping and farting as he eats, under the tender care of his second wife, Aram, who fans him and removes the bones from the morsels of fish that she places at his reach. After a good meal and a dessert of papaya, Ibrahima praises Allah for his glory and thanks his wife for the best meal his has had in years. Too full to stand up, Ibrahima crawls to bed. He asks his wife to massage his feet, and he falls asleep as she is laboring on him. Aram asks Maty if she told their husband about the money order. Maty replies that she will after he has a good rest. The water man enters Ibrahima's compound, carrying his merchandise. Aram gets the family some water on credit.



**Ibrahima misses his prayer** The muezzin's call to the afternoon prayer comes pouring through Ibrahima's window. The whole of village is at the mosque, but Ibrahima is too sound asleep to hear the muezzin. Ibrahima, his wives, and their children slumber and miss the afternoon prayer. Ibrahima wakes up hours later. He reprimands his wives for sleeping and forgetting to wake him up for his prayer. Ibrahima's wives put on their veils to catch up on their prayer. He tells them that it is too late, and that there are precise times for prayers.



**Ibrahima is informed about the money order** Ibrahima gets dressed and exits the compound. His wives interrupt their prayer and catch up with him in the street. He thinks that they have come to ask him for money, and he starts scolding them. They tell him that he has a money order sent by his nephew from France. Ibrahima tells his wives to enter the compound and not talk about money in the street. Ibrahima wants to know if his wives have told anyone about the money order. They tell him that they took some rice on credit with the grocer, promising to pay him when he cashes his money order. Ibrahima gets angry and tells his wives that only he, the chief of the family, must decide what they get on credit.



**Ibrahima borrows money from the grocer** The grocer informs Ibrahima that his wives came to get some rice and cooking oil on credit. Ibrahima tells him that he will pay him tomorrow, for he has received a money order. The grocer tells Ibrahima that he has also reserved him two kilograms of some special rice from Indochina. Ibrahima borrows fifty cents from the grocer for a taxi to the post office to cash his money order



**Reading Abdou's letter** Ibrahima heads to the post office. One of his neighbors decides to walk with him there. Ibrahima has his nephew's letter, which came at the same time as the money order, read to him by a private writer and interpreter at the post office. In his letter, Abdou, who works as a street sweeper in France, tells his uncle that he is doing very well in France and trying to be a good Muslim. Abdou explains that he left Dakar because of the lack of job, and he went to France to find a job and pursue studies in commerce. Abdou tells his uncle what to do with the 25,000 francs he sent him: 20,000 francs must be saved for him for when he returns, 3,000 francs must be given to his mother, and the remaining 2000 are for his uncle to keep. Ibrahima owes 50 francs to the public interpreter, which he promises to pay when he cashes his money order.



**Ibrahima has no ID or birth certificate** Ibrahima does not have any proof of Identity to cash the money order. Ibrahima is asked to go to the police station get a new ID made before he can cash his money order. At the police station, Ibrahima is asked to provide his birth certificate, three photos and a 50-cent stamp. Ibrahima does not have a birth certificate. He is asked to go to the city hall to get one. Ibrahima walks to the city hall because none of his wives can lend him money for the bus. There, the employees do not notice him. They are busy complaining about not having been paid for the past six months. Ibrahima does not know his exact birth month. The disgruntled city hall employee asks him to come back when he has this information.



**Coveting Ibrahima's house** As they exit the post office, Ibrahima's friend confesses that he needs a 5,000 francs loan. Mbaye Sarr, one of Ibrahima's nephews drives a man to the front of Ibrahima's house; the man seems interested in buying Ibrahima's house. Ibrahima's nephew tells the man that Ibrahima is broke, has two wives and seven children and is obsessed by his appearance. The nephew guarantees the prospective buyer that he will get Ibrahima to sell him his house.

**Borrowers** Another one of Ibrahima's nephews, Sarr, hears some music in the compound. Ibrahima's first wife explains that these are people who have gotten wind of Ibrahima's money order and have come to celebrate, praise him and borrow some money. The next day, the Imam comes to see Ibrahima early in the morning as he is having breakfast. The Imam tells Ibrahima that he needs a 5,000 francs loan. Ibrahima tells him that he has yet to cash the money order, and that he will gladly help him as soon as he cashes the money order.

**Madiagne wants some rice** While they are eating, another man, Madiagne, comes to see Ibrahima. Times are hard, says Madiagne. So, he has come to borrow 10 kilograms of rice. Ibrahima is not enthusiastic. Madiagne insists that he has not eaten for three days and begs Ibrahima to give him at least 5 kilograms of rice. The Imam gets up and leaves not without reminding Ibrahima that he is his only hope. Ibrahima calls Maty and asks her to give Madiagne 3 kilograms of rice. Maty tells her husband that there is not enough rice for the family. Ibrahima gets angry and threatens to hit her. Madiagne turns to Maty and begs for help. Maty tells Aram that they cannot starve their children to satisfy Madiagne's request. She hides the rice and brings a small portion to Madiagne. Ibrahima hands Madiagne the rice and promises to help him more when he cashes his money order. Madiagne shows his rice to the Imam and tells him that Maty will not give him more than that. The imam is shocked and retorts that Maty is the one who rules Ibrahima's household. Then he asks Allah to have mercy on men and protect them from women's authority. The Imam and his friends bet that Ibrahima will be broke soon.



### **Nephew Hamath helps Ibrahima**

He wonders who can help him. He starts thinking about what the neighbors will say, what dishonor will cover him if he returns empty handed. He starts begging for money with strangers, unsuccessfully. He decides to go see his nephew Hamath. Hamath greets Ibrahima warmly. Ibrahima explains his dilemma to his nephew. Hamath gives him some money and a check for him to cash at the bank. Then, Hamath drives his uncle to the city hall to see what one of his contacts there can do for him. Hamath's contact promises to take care of Ibrahima's case and asks him to return the next day. Hamath drops his uncle off. Ibrahima holds his nephew's hands up and starts praying for him. Some passersby join in to also benefit from Allah's grace. Ibrahima arrives home exhausted. His first wife, Maty gives him some water to quench his thirst and proceeds to wash his feet. Ibrahima thanks Allah, lies in his bed, and goes to sleep right away.



### **Beggars and hustlers**

As he goes to the bank to cash the check his nephew gave him, Ibrahima is accosted by a young woman begging for money. At the bank, a young man helps Ibrahima cash his check with a service fee of 300 francs. On his way home, Ibrahima is accosted by the same woman he helped earlier. She is asking for money with a different story this time. Ibrahima tells her that he just gave her some money. She swears that he is mistaken.



### **Impatient creditors and beggars**

Ibrahima goes to have his ID picture taken. While doing her household chores, Aram sings about how much her husband's money order will change their lives. She sings that their daily routine of borrowing money and begging is over. Aram sings for Allah to give her husband a long life so he can continue to honor his family. Maty and Aram evaluate how many things they have obtained on credit or given to neighbors on credit. They realize that they are getting swamped in debts very quickly. The Imam is impatient to hear from Ibrahima. The water boy wants to be paid. Astou, Ibrahima's sister, wants her part of the money order that her son, Abdou, sent from Paris.

### **Pawning Aram's necklace**

Ibrahima takes Aram's necklace to Mbarka, the grocer. He wants 5,000 francs for it, but Mbarka tells him that he is not interested, and that Ibrahima owes him too much money. One of Mbarka's friends will give Ibrahima 2,000 francs plus 500 francs interest for the bracelet to be reimbursed in three days. Ibrahima has no choice but to accept. Aram gives her precious jewelry to Ibrahima to pawn to avoid the shame of the creditors. The Imam catches Ibrahima as he is counting the money he received for Aram's necklace. Ibrahima tells the Imam that the money is to pay his sister. The Imam tells Ibrahima to not let women rule him. He tells Ibrahima that men should help each other. Ibrahima remains firm and tells the Imam that he can do nothing for him.



### **The false rumors**

Ibrahima's wives wailings alert the neighbors. Ibrahima's wives also start a rumor that their husband was attacked and robbed. Other people embroider the rumor and add that Ibrahima was dispossessed of 100,000 francs by the robbers.

### **Ibrahima receives charity**

The neighbors give alms to Ibrahima in the form of food, sugar, milk, cola nuts and money. He calls his wives and scolds them for spreading rumors that he was mugged and making him pass for a needy man. He is worried about what people will say if they discover that the money order is still at the post office. Maty and Aram tell their husband that he can always blame them when the truth comes out.



### **In six days, he money will be returned**

The mailman brings Ibrahima a second notice to let him know that the money is still at the post office. Ibrahima counts how many days he spent pursuing that money and realizes that in six days the money will be returned to the sender in France. Ibrahima's wives fear the prospect of losing that money.

### **Ibrahima fight with Mbarka**

Ibrahima goes to Mbarka, the grocer, for another loan. Mbarka tells him that he cannot give him a loan. However, he tells Ibrahima, he knows someone who will buy Ibrahima's house. Ibrahima gets angry and tells Mbarka that he will never sell his house. Mbarka and Ibrahima





get into a fight. A crowd gathers in front of Mbarka's store. Mbarka tells the crowd that Ibrahima has never been mugged, and that he just wants to keep the money for himself. Ibrahima's friend comes to his rescue and tells Mbarka that he witnessed Ibrahima being attacked. Ibrahima's wives, too, come to his defense. The Imam sides with Mbarka.

**Sarr cheats Ibrahima** Ibrahima's nephew, Mbaye Sarr, asks him to come and see him to resolve the money order issue. Sarr asks Ibrahima to sign him a proxy so he can cash the money order for him. The next day, as Ibrahima goes to Sarr to fetch his money, Sarr tells him that he was mugged, and that he lost both Ibrahima's money and his own 75,000 francs. Ibrahima begs Sarr not to do that to him. He tells him that he has a family to feed. Sarr tells him coldly that he knows that, but that there is nothing he can do. Sarr offers 10 kilograms of rice to Ibrahima. Ibrahima tells him that it is his money he wants.



**Ibrahima is broken** Mbaye drops Ibrahima off in front of his house with a sack of rice. Ibrahima sits in front of the rice, crying with his head in his hands. The women of the neighborhood come and help themselves to the rice. Ibrahima's wives wrest the sack of rice from the women and take their husband inside the compound.



**I will be a wolf among wolves** Ibrahima explains his misfortune to his wives. They lament the loss of the money. Aram laments the loss of her necklace. Ibrahima says that decency is no longer valued in Senegal, and only indecent people succeed. So, he vows to become a wolf among wolves, a thief among thieves. The mailman tells Ibrahima to have hope, and that all of them, he, his wives, his children, and he, the mailman, will change the country.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**IBRAHIMA DIENG** Ibrahima Dieng is a generous man, but authoritarian and hypocritical. He controls his wives with a master's hand. However, he does not hesitate to share what he has, or thinks he has, with his friends and neighbors. He gives those around him the impression of being a good Muslim. His faith, however, is a facade of conformity that hides a fragile spirituality.

*Generous* Ibrahima Dieng is a generous man, who would push his generosity to the point of total destitution for his own family. When neighbors learn that Ibrahima has received a money order from his nephew living in Paris, his courtyard is swarming with solicitors. Some come for money, others for rice. Ibrahima refuses none of them anything. He promises to meet their demands even beyond the means offered by his money order of 25,000 francs, of which only 2,000 francs are allocated to him. Had it not been for the vigilance of his wives, Ibrahima would even have given away the family's last kilograms of rice and starved his children.

*Authoritarian* Ibrahima Dieng is an authoritarian husband. As he reminds his wives, he is the man of the house and therefore the only one entitled to make decisions that affect the family. He does not like to be contradicted. For example, when Maty tells him that there is no more rice for the family, and that giving three kilograms of rice to a solicitor would put them and their children in a precarious situation, he gets angry and almost hits her.

*Hypocrite* Having eaten his fill, satiated like a boa, Ibrahima falls into a deep sleep that not even the call of the muezzin over the loudspeakers, can interrupt. So, he misses the important Friday prayer. And when he wakes up, he blames his wives for falling asleep and not waking him in time. In truth, Ibrahima is only a devout Muslim in that he repeats Allah's name excessively, remembering it only in his hour of need. Like most of the men in his neighborhood, including the Imam himself, Ibrahima's faith is mechanical. There is nothing genuine about it.

**ARAM AND MATY** Ibrahima's two wives are prototypes of the traditional Senegalese woman. They are unconditionally submissive to their husbands, and owe him devotion and respect. They know that their reputation depends on Ibrahima's, and they bend over backwards to spare him dishonor.

*Submissive* Ibrahima's wives are like traditional African women, submissive to their husbands. When Maty and Aram address their husbands, they do so on their knees. When Ibrahima eats, one of his wives stands in front of him and, as a mother would do for her child, removes the bones from the fish and places them in front of him. She fans him while he eats, and when he has finished eating, massages him until he falls asleep. And when Ibrahima returns from his long walks, one of his wives is always ready to wash his feet and dry them to make him feel better.

*Loyal* Ibrahima's wives stand by their husband. They work to spare him shame by rationing the family's food supplies to keep the home fires burning. They console Ibrahima when he's in despair. And they come to his rescue when he's vulnerable. For example, Aram gives her husband her necklace to pawn to pay off his debts. Ibrahima's wives work together to maintain an honorable image of their husband and family.

*Pragmatic* Ibrahima lives in an illusory world. He comes and goes in his household without knowing the real difficulties his wives and children endure. It is his wives, Maty and Aram, who manage the household and assess its needs. So, when Ibrahima decides to offer the family's last cups of rice to a solicitor, Maty and Aram hide the precious commodity so as not to starve their children. And when they hear their husband is in trouble, they are the ones who come up with a strategy to get him out of trouble. It is thanks to the pragmatic management of his wives that Ibrahima's family survives his unemployment.

*Cunning* Ibrahima's wives realize that their husband is in debt beyond his financial means. They have taken out a huge quantity of groceries on credit, and their compound continues to teem with solicitors. To save Ibrahima from the parasites and shame, they spread the rumor that Ibrahima has been attacked by thieves, who stole his money order. From then on, the solicitors stop pestering Ibrahima, and instead of stretching their hands to Ibrahima for help, it is now the neighbors who give him alms in the form of food and money.

**MBARKA** A local shopkeeper, Mbarka is a businessman with dubious methods. He is dishonest and hypocritical. He has set up a system of usury whereby almost everyone in the neighborhood owes him money. This enables him to become the master of all, who, in order to pay himself, uses pressure and blackmail to strip his debtors of their most precious possessions at the lowest possible cost.

*Dishonest* In debt and still in urgent need of money to pay his sister her share of the money order, Ibrahima decides to pawn Aram's necklace to Mbarka. Pretending that the necklace is of no interest to him, Mbarka passes the necklace to one of his accomplices, who loans Ibrahima the money with high interests. Unable to reimburse the money, Ibrahima ends up losing the necklace to Mbarka's accomplice. Lacking the courage to expose his dishonesty, Mbarka uses accomplices to fleece his customers.

*Hypocritical* Mbarka is a hypocritical businessman. Under the pretext of helping his customers, he opens a credit account for each of them. This allows him to keep them under his thumb until, exhausted and unable to pay, they sell him their most precious possessions. Thus, for a fraction of its original price, he takes possession of Aram's necklace, which Ibrahima had pawned. Mbarka's acts of kindness are always motivated by an agenda of profit.

## THEMES

**RELIGION** Religion is an unavoidable aspect of Senegalese society. Everything, or almost everything, revolves around religion. People are judged and measured according to religious morality, and every act is weighed in the scales of religion. Ibrahima Dieng is unemployed and lives by his wits. But he is convinced that if he has managed to overcome life's vicissitudes, it is because Allah is in his corner, protecting and guiding him. So, he glorifies Allah every day, good and bad. He is poor, but he gives alms to those poorer than himself, convinced that Allah will repay him a hundredfold. Religion is also used to justify certain reprehensible acts. When the local Imam and Ibrahima's neighbors come to him begging for rice and loans, they come to him promising Allah's blessings. And Ibrahima, who is at the end of his rope himself, would have handed over, in the name of Allah, the last of his family's resources and starved his children if his wives had not stepped in. The Senegalese commitment to religion, Sembène seems to suggest, is largely theatrical. Indeed, once satiated and having noisily expurgated the effluvia of his digestion, Ibrahima falls asleep and forgets his Friday prayer. As for the Imam, the religious guide who is supposed to advise and calm any unrest, he is instead the propagator of rumors and Ibrahima's betrayer when the latter sincerely

tells him that he is unable to grant his request for a loan. The Senegalese man's spirituality seems to be a mere façade, which, at the end of the film, prompts a disillusioned Ibrahima to promise that he too will be a wolf in the great Senegalese community of wolves and thieves.

**CORRUPTION** Senegal is a society of moral and spiritual corruption, Sembène seems to be telling us. Morally, Senegalese society seems to give priority to those who break the law or engage in simulation. Mbarka is a shopkeeper who engages in illegal practices. He's a loan shark who exploits the hardships of the people in his neighborhood to enrich himself and drive them further into poverty. In addition, the "photographer" is a swindler who never puts a roll of film in his camera and charges his customers for services he never renders. Ibrahima's nephew, Mbaye Sarr, takes advantage of his uncle's illiteracy to cheat him out of his money order and to sell his house, and he has no regrets. In government services, nothing is easy to obtain, unless one bribes employees or knows an influential person who can intervene on the applicant's behalf. For example, to collect the check given to him by his nephew Hamath, Ibrahima, who has no identity card, must pay a bribe of 300 francs to a bank teller, via a broker posted at the entrance. And to obtain a birth certificate, Ibrahima has to use his nephew's connections. Alongside this moral corruption, there is the spiritual corruption symbolized by the neighborhood Imam. Jealous, insensitive and a gossip, the Imam is the antithesis of what his position requires of him. In the Imam's unbridled logic, Allah grants mercy only to those who help him, the Imam.

**PATRIARCHY** Despite being a deficient husband and father, who keeps his family on the edge of starvation, Ibrahima is a king in his household. He is the epitome of Senegalese life organized around the preponderance of the all-powerful male. In Ibrahima's household, everyone stops whatever they are doing to serve the master. The children may cry from boredom or hunger, but until Ibrahima's needs are met, no attention will be given to them. When Ibrahima enters the compound, his wives welcome him on their knees. When he speaks to them, they kneel to listen. And when he sits down to eat, one of his wives has to make sure that his fish is cleaned of any bones that might cause him discomfort, and that the heat of Dakar is blown away from his face by a fan she manually activates. And only when she has lulled Ibrahima to sleep with a good massage after his collation can his wife withdraw to tend to the needs of her children and herself. For the Imam, all these efforts made by Ibrahima's wives to satisfy their husband are not enough. Maty dared to contradict her husband's order to give the family's last kilograms of rice to Madiagne. Furthermore, Ibrahima will not give the Imam the money he got for pawning Aram's necklace, and which he intends to give to his sister, Astou. For the Imam, this is proof that Ibrahima is being robbed of his authority by his wives and women in general. So, he advises Ibrahima to get his act together and remember that men must first help men.

**BUREAUCRACY** In *Mandabi*, Sembène criticizes bureaucratic red tape, one of the scourges of independent African states struggling to maintain the efficiency of the administrative machinery inherited from colonization. This bureaucratic cumbersomeness is skillfully illustrated by Ibrahima's difficulties in proving his identity. In every office he goes, there are long queues in front of the counters. Disgruntled civil servants with wage arrears take out their frustrations on customers. And Ibrahima's long comings and goings from his suburb to Dakar's administrative district testify to a lack of decentralization policy. African governments in general fail to realize that a fluid administration requires that each department be fully outfitted with government and civil services rather than centralizing all the services in one place, in the capital city. Indeed, African decision-makers act as if the countries they govern are limited to capital cities. Everything, from hospitals to administrative services, is concentrated there. And Ibrahima's friend notes this when at the post office, they are asked to go all the way to the police station to have Ibrahima's identity card issued: "The police station is a long way away," he says. Indeed, Ibrahima's journey doesn't end there, as the police station sends him to the town hall, where he is asked to go and think about his month of birth, and also to see the photographer for a picture. African administration is cumbersome because it is tightly centralized, requires an awful lot of paperwork, and is staffed by poorly paid and unmotivated employees—such is Sembène's criticism.

**EXCHANGE** Ibrahima's nephew Abdou, who has gone into exile in France and is unsure when he will return to his native country, raises the crucial question of the deteriorating terms of trade between the West and Africa. Abdou is a young man with some education in Senegal, who, disillusioned by the impossibility of finding work in his country, offers himself to France as a street sweeper. Abdou is also taking evening classes with a view to obtaining a business degree. Abdou is a metaphor for the

plundering of Africa's intellectual resources, exported to Europe as cheap, unskilled labor. Abdou promises his uncle to remain a good Muslim and a man of integrity, not to lose himself in Western immorality. These are noble sentiments, which, as we see in another of Ibrahima's nephews, Mbaye Sarr, could be compromised by the harsh realities of the Western terrain. Indeed, Sarr returns from Europe with a degree in Business Studies, only to turn out to be a notorious swindler. It is Sarr who promises one of his clients to sell him his uncle's house, taking advantage of Ibrahima's financial difficulties. And it is Sarr again, who, using a power of attorney given to him by his uncle to cash his money order, keeps the money for himself, throwing the unfortunate man into despair. Like the cheaper African cocoa beans that go to Europe and come back to Africa as chocolate bars packed with useless, overpriced calories, Abdou is what Africa sends to Europe, and Sarr is the manufactured product that comes back to Africa. They are metaphors for the deteriorating terms of trade between the South and the North.

**UNEMPLOYMENT** Sembène raises a recurring problem in post-independence Africa, namely the inability of African governments to provide jobs for their people. Ibrahima has been unemployed for four years, and feeds his family only with alms from neighbors and groceries obtained on credit from the grocer, Mbarka. Like his uncle, young Abdou was unable to land a job back home after graduating. So, he decided to go into exile in France as a street sweeper, and to take evening classes in Business Studies in the hope of eventually moving into commercial activities. The scourge of unemployment seems so endemic that it defines people's lives. Apart from the women, who are busy with household chores or at the local markets, most of the men seem to sink into indolence, watching out for the slightest fortune from their neighbor so that they, too, can take advantage of it. Ibrahima's compound, for example, becomes the theater of the needy as soon as news of the money order spreads. His idle friend decides to accompany him to the post office, hoping for a loan of 5,000 francs in return. The imam also comes to him for a loan of 5,000 francs. Madiagne comes to beg for ten kilograms of rice. And all these unemployed men, in their daily activities, are ultimately nothing more than professional beggars. Here Sembène takes secret aim at African governments addicted to international aid. They are just like all those men who have their hands stretched out every day and must devise begging strategies to feed their families.

**POSTCOLONIAL/NEOCOLONIAL MINDSET** Ibrahima has received a money order from his nephew, Abdou. However, he can only cash the money order if he shows up at the post office with his identity card, which he does not have. And this is where Ibrahima's difficulties begin. Born in an era of predominantly oral traditions, when births were not dated numerically but rather by reference to natural or cultural events, Ibrahima is required to prove his identity with a document specifying his precise date of birth in order to be entitled to his money. He has a voter's card which vaguely states that he was born around 1900. However, this is insufficient for the town hall official, who tells him to think it over and not to return to the counter until he has determined the precise month in which he was born. Ibrahima's peregrinations to obtain an identity card show his maladjustment to the post- or neo-colonial world. Here, the world he has always known, that of the informal, collapses, and another world demands that he justify his existence, prove that he is not irrelevant. This new world is square, unforgiving, uncompromising. It refuses all negotiation, all explanation. Or maybe it has its own rules that Ibrahima cannot understand. Maybe, in spite of all its principles, this new world is just a rotten world where everything can be bought and sold. After all, wouldn't 300 francs slipped to a young man in a waxed suit at the bank have been enough to bypass the requirement for an identity card and allow him to collect his nephew Hamath's check? Wouldn't 300 francs slipped to the town hall employee have settled the identity card issue? In truth, this new post-colonial or neo-colonial world has its rules, which Ibrahima ignores. They are no better than the rules of the old world. And when Ibrahima finally understands the general principles of this new world, in which his generous nephews Abdou and Hamath are only exceptions, but to which the employees of the post office and town hall, the young hustler at the bank, the fake photographer, the grocer and his nephew Sarr all belong, he decides that, like them, he too will be a wolf among wolves, a thief among thieves.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As he did in *Black girl* (1966), Sembène casts himself again in *Mandabi* in the role of a public writer and interpreter. How does this role square with the role that he assigns to himself as a *griot* (an African storyteller and historian)?
2. By what images does the filmmaker show that Ibrahima is a proud and conceited character?
3. What are the devices by which Sembène mocks the power of patriarchy?



4. What does each of Ibrahima's three nephews symbolize in the postcolonial African society (Abdou, who sends Ibrahima the money order; Mamath, who gives him a check to help him; Sarr, who cheats him out of his money order)? Elaborate your answer.
5. Sembène's films tend to highlight the preponderant roles that women play in African societies. How does he succeed in doing that in *Mandabi*?